

Annals of the Harp

Adele Girard Marsala: First Lady of the Jazz Harp

by Eleisa Marsala Trampler

A future jazz great encounters the perils of outdoor performing

Adele Girard was fifteen years old in 1928 when she was invited to play harp with her father's orchestra in Holyoke, Massachusetts. Leon Girard had no real knowledge of Adele's progress on the harp. He was busy trying to make a living as a conductor of the Springfield Broadcast Symphony, the Holyoke City Band, the Capital Symphony Orchestra and the occasional small group combo. With the advent of the movie sound track, in 1927, Leon and his brother Romeo had both lost their steady jobs as violinists in the pit orchestra of the Bijou Theater.

Adele's teacher, Alice Mikus, approached Leon.

"You'd better come and hear your daughter play the harp," she urged.

A few years earlier Adele had come home lugging a string bass from Springfield's Commerce High School. She was tall and strong, so the band instructor thought she'd be a natural for the bass.

"You get that doghouse out of here!" thundered her father, who was not going to have his daughter playing such an ungainly instrument. And, red faced, Adele turned around and hauled the bass back to school.

Adele had secretly yearned for her father to teach her the violin, but her brother Don was accorded the honor instead. She would have to be content with the piano lessons which both she and Don were given by their mother. Completely surrounded by music as she was, it would have been unnatural for Adele to become anything but a musician. As a five-year-old, she accompanied her Uncles, George and Wilfred, as they sang "K-K-K-Katy," and later, "Over There," and "I Passed by Your Window." Adele said that though she played simply, she played all the right notes.

Eleisa Noel Girard, Adele's mother, took matters into her own hands when Adele was invited to play with her father. Eleisa, known as Lizza, sang opera and appeared in musical theater. She played the piano for a ballet school and painted china to help make ends meet. She was also a superior seamstress who kept the



Adele Girard with her Bertha collar

family wardrobe in fashion. Off she went to the Skinner Satin Mills in Holyoke to purchase a suitable fabric for the occasion. Typically Adele recalled the dress perfectly. It was a pink silk organza with a white lace Bertha collar, and tied at the waist with a narrow black velveteen sash. White stockings and black patent leather shoes completed the outfit.

The orchestra had been hired to play at a garden party. Adele had rehearsed and played to perfection, "The Swan," from Saint-Saens' *Carnival of the Animals*. When it was her turn, she set her music on the stand and sat at the harp. She placed her fingers on the strings and played the first chord. Prrrrring! At that moment a gust of wind came up and took her music off to heaven knows where. Adele kept her eyes on the

ground, not daring to look at her father. She heard a soft snort coming from the direction of her Uncle Romeo and knew that he was laughing. She barely suppressed a small nervous giggle herself.

At this point in the story I always asked my mother, "But didn't anyone get you your music?" I couldn't believe that the answer was no. Apparently everyone else in the orchestra had a clothespin clipped to their music stand for just such an event, but no one had offered one to her. "What did you do?" I asked, hoping for a happy ending to the tale.

"Nothing," Adele replied. "I just sat there while the orchestra went on to the next number. I was devastated but I couldn't very well improvise the *Carnival of the Animals!*"

Happily, Adele did learn to improvise on the harp, in fact all her efforts in jazz were directed toward that end because the situation demanded it. Adele could literally improvise an entire piece of music from the old saw, "Hum a few bars..."

Harpo Marx once asked Adele if she would teach him how to play jazz. She considered a moment and said, "I don't think you can really teach jazz. Jazz is something you feel." She felt that her greatest inspiration came from the fine jazz artists she played with. A good jazz ensemble will play behind each soloist, supporting them rhythmically and harmonically, yet allow-

ing them to shine.

During her jazz years at the Hickory House in New York City in the early 1940s, and with some money finally coming in, Adele decided to broaden her knowledge of the classical harp by studying with the master himself, Marcel Grandjany. She took a number of lessons. Apparently Grandjany felt it was unnecessary. "Why do you want to study with me?" he asked. "You know how to play jazz!" Adele was never one to approach the harp timidly or mincingly, as she put it; her instructions to pupils in her last years were to play with strength, authority and confidence.

Endnote:

Sadly, my mother didn't record much, but I've recently gone through her old tapes and placed on two CDs, some recordings by Adele that were never released plus a session that is out of print.

Joe Marsala and Adele Girard, The Sweethearts of Swing offers a 1957 recording session with some fine old jazz renditions such as "Singin' the Blues," "I Cried for You," and "Chicago." Additionally there are some tunes Adele wrote, the "Harp Boogie," which sets the standard for a blues improvisation on harp (an older version can be seen on film and is used in a presentation by jazz film collector Mark Cantor), "Flamenco," which highlights her ability to compose and play in a classical vein, and "I Think We Ought to Have a Drink," a lighthearted tune which Adele played for lyricist Johnny Mercer who penned the words. Finally, this CD contains a nostalgic home concert recorded in the early 70s and featuring two of husband Joe's pop compositions, "Don't Cry Joe" and "And So to Sleep Again," along with Joe's favorite Italian songs, "Torna a Sorriento" and "Oi, Mari."

Swingin' on a Harp was recorded sometime in the early 1980s after Joe's death. Adele was on her own, playing solo in various venues in southern California and developing a repertoire of new and old favorites. This CD contains such standards as "Embraceable You," "But Not For Me," and "S Wonderful," as well as newer works: "Send in the Clowns," "New York, New York," and "Don't Cry For Me, Argentina." A number of tunes are dedicated to Joe, with Italian songs, "Mala Femmena" and "Anima e Core," and Adele's composition, "Marsala Blues," especially in his memory. All bear her special stamp, her own arrangements improvised as she played without music.

Additionally I have had a third album of traditional Christmas carols, which was released on Totem Records in the 1970s, placed on CD as well. *Merry Christmas, Adele Girard* is Adele's tribute to her favorite holiday.

For further information please contact me at: ttrampler@aol.com. 

CAL STATE FULLERTON

Mindy Ball
Instructor of Harp

**Solo - Orchestra
Chamber Music**

For information contact:
Dr. Gordon Paine, Music Department
P.O. Box 34080
Fullerton, CA 92834
(714) 773-3511