

on the lighter side

The Classic Jazz of Mimi Allen

by Carol McLaughlin



A recent portrait by Robert Bruce Williams

The music of Mimi Allen encompasses the best of both worlds: the free thinking of jazz and the discipline of classical music.

Mimi's early training was with her mother who was a concert pianist. She performed in her first piano concert when she was but three years old, and from an early age met outstanding musicians who visited her home.

When she was small, everyone knew that "Mimi would play the harp." Her first harp was given to her when she was fourteen years old. The harp had belonged to a nun, and had been stored in an attic for thirty years. The harp, a Lyon & Healy style 22, arrived one day in the back of a pick-up truck, a gift from a relative of the nun.

When Mimi was fifteen years old she received a scholarship to attend Stephens College in her native Missouri where she studied with the great pianist Isidor Philipp (who had also been a teacher of Mimi's mother). It was at the college that Mimi first heard Carlos Salzedo perform. A year after entering, Mimi traveled with her harp teachers, Ruth Dean (Clark) and Eleanor Mellinger, to Camden, Maine, to study with Salzedo. She was told by Mr. Salzedo that "when she was ready" he would give her a scholarship to study with him in New York. At age eighteen, when she had completed a Bachelor of Music Degree at Stephens, Mimi moved to New York to study harp on the promised scholarship with Carlos Salzedo, and, at the same time, to continue piano lessons on scholarship with Isidor Philipp.

Mimi views Salzedo as a "great, great teacher." She remembers vividly receiving a telephone call from Salzedo when she was a student of his in New York. He told her

that Marjorie Call was ill and that Mimi had only two weeks to learn all the music for a concert tour with the Salzedo Concert Ensemble. Mimi had previously worked on duo-harp material with Ruth Cobb but had never before performed with an ensemble such as this. She recalls its being "trial by fire!" The ensemble consisted of two harps, flute, and cello, with Salzedo playing first harp.

The Concert Ensemble was under the management of Columbia Artists, and toured throughout Canada and the United States in addition to a two-week tour of Cuba. Other tours to Mexico and Italy had been contracted, but had to be cancelled when Salzedo experienced ill health.

Though Mimi remembers Salzedo with great warmth, she admits she was "scared to death of him." Each day on tour with him was like an extended lesson. He was concerned with teaching her to "walk with dignity, talk with dignity, project my voice, and even to speak French!" He had very strict rules which had to be followed. Each member of the ensemble (all women except Salzedo) had to have concert attire approved by him. He particularly wished vibrant colors on stage, and no black or white was allowed. Mimi remained with the ensemble for four years, then moved back to Sikeston, Missouri, with her husband, whom she had met in New York.

Mimi Allen's first introduction to improvisation came from Salzedo. He would go to the piano and play a piece first in the style of Debussy, then in a contrasting style. Mimi would echo the style and rhythmic variations on either piano or harp. An earlier student of Salzedo's, Casper Reardon, influenced Mimi greatly by his recordings of jazz music on the harp.



Mimi Allen at age three



A publicity picture for a CBS educational "special"

Mimi's own jazz career really started when she moved back to Missouri and started taping her own music and listening to playbacks of it—a process she found "fascinating." She played one of these recordings for a representative of Columbia Artists, who was very impressed with it and introduced her to Owen Bradley, Vice-President of Decca Records. Through that contract came Mimi's first two solo recordings, "Strings of My Heart" and "There Goes My Harp." These included pieces such as "Tenderly," "Begin the Beguine," and "The Continental."

Mimi later had a disagreement with Decca over the recording of a rock-and-roll harp album—a project Mimi

considered to be in very bad taste. She broke contract with Decca and returned to studio work in St. Louis and Memphis, combined with television work for CBS in St. Louis.

One series of TV specials, the CBS *Montages*, featured Mimi performing both classical and jazz harp. The final show of the series was a George Gershwin special on which Mimi played her own arrangements of his pieces. Marcel Grandjany saw this show and immediately invited Mimi to perform these pieces at the first American Harp Society Conference to be held in New York. Mimi agreed—after requiring a written confirmation that it was Gershwin that Mr. Grandjany wanted!

Many of Mimi's Gershwin arrangements can be heard on her record, *Mimi Allen Plays Gershwin*, available from Virtuosity Record Co., Memphis, and the harp companies. None of her arrangements is taken from written music. They are all done by ear, with Mimi playing what she *hears* should be there.

Mimi considers her music "classic jazz." She incorporates the rhythms and patterns of the classics with the harmonies and other elements of jazz. She says, "Why throw your classics away—use them!" Mimi believes that you can't play jazz without a strong technical background, and she is a "stickler for technique" with her many students. She is preparing a new record featuring classic jazz, which will include such pieces as "Jamaican Rhumba" and "Summertime Two."

Years after Mimi had completed her studies in New York with Salzedo, she was recording for Decca in Nashville and ran into Salzedo, who was performing as soloist with the Nashville Symphony. She told her mentor that she was performing jazz and that she really loved it, adding, "it's a real challenge."

Salzedo responded, "As long as you do it in good taste, I will be pleased. But you have to work at it, Mimi!" Mimi says with a smile, "And I've been working at it ever since!"

Editor's Note

Ms. Allen would like to make clear that she is still teaching and performing classical music as well as jazz.



The Salzedo Ensemble on tour in 1947—explaining the many uses of harp trunks