

## HOW TO GET INTO COMMERCIAL HARP WORK

By Louise Trotter

The following, a report on getting started in commercial harp work, was given at the 3rd Annual All-Texas Harp Festival held at the University of Texas on April 11 and 12, 1959. Questionnaires were sent out to professional harpists in various parts of the country. The results, taking one question at a time, were:

1. *Is it necessary to have a music degree?*

All replied no, but added that training is essential. Reinhardt Elster, first harpist of the Metropolitan Opera Company, wrote that conductors and contractors are primarily interested in what you can do, your experience, and perhaps special qualifications.

2. *Do you find it necessary to improvise often?*

Half replied yes. Half replied that while it is not often required, on occasion it is necessary to know how. Mr. Elster: "In a sense, much of what one does is improvisation. Many arrangers know very little about writing for the harp. One must rearrange and transcribe parts on the spot, must, for example, revoice chords, lengthen or shorten glissandos, change registers on chords and glissandos, etc."

3. *Do you make your own arrangements from piano or conductor's score?*

All replied yes, usually from a piano score.

4. *Does it add to your chances a great deal if you sing well or play the piano too?*

All replied yes, mainly because it makes you a better musician. Mr. Elster: "Occasionally, in commercial work, being able to play piano or celeste is a useful and desirable asset. For this you receive an extra 'doubling' fee. Singing with the harp is a special entertainment feature, it would seem, directed more toward an act for TV or night club."

5. *Is a second vocation necessary to sustain a harpist while waiting for a job?*

Replies were divided among "possibly", "sometimes", or "absolutely". Music education and secretarial work were mentioned.

6. *What is the minimum monthly cost of living in a big city? (\$200, \$300, \$400, etc.)*

Only two replied. For Dallas, Texas, it was estimated that \$350 would provide for living well. In New York City \$200 to \$300 was suggested for a bare living.

7. *How long does it take to join the Musicians' Union and how much does it cost?*

In most places it is six months and \$50, but in San Francisco there is no time limit and the fee is \$100.

8. *Are there any jobs where Union membership is not required?*

All agreed there are not many jobs without Union membership other than for churches, clubs and social affairs.

9. *Do you transport your harp most by Moving Van or Station Wagon?*

Half replied by Moving Van, half by Station Wagon.

10. *On cross country, do you prefer Motor Freight or Railway Express?*

Motor Freight, Railway Travel (excess baggage) and Railway Express were all mentioned. Railway Express was thought to be the safest.

11. *Does it help a great deal to sign up with an agency? Is the fee 10%?*

Most replied no to the first question, but one said yes. The fee is usually 10%, with 15% or 20% for concert managers. Mr. Elster: "I don't know, but I don't think it would help unless you plan a special solo or entertainment career. In the commercial field you are hired by contractors who must know you or know of you through other musicians."

12. *How do you suggest approaching the television field?*

Local appearances on small stations give good experience. Then try to have ideas for attractive presentation or join an act (agencies help here). A great deal of orchestra experience is necessary, and a newcomer should not count on this field. Mr. Elster: "The free lance field in radio and TV has been absorbed by the networks and is now all done by staff players, except for occasional extras. This hiring is done through the network contractor. However, the staff jobs are no longer as secure as they were. There has always been an eight week notice for network players, but this is now frequently used for changing the instrumentation to suit changing program requirements."

13. *Does radio offer anything for the harpist?*

Very little is offered except in a large city; local stations use recordings almost exclusively.

14. *Do you find that a young harpist can best begin her career in dinner music at hotels, lounges, etc.?*

Answers were yes, but a note of advice was added in one reply that the young harpist might well be judicious in choosing her friends. Sometimes the late hours and variety of patrons do not offer a "sheltered" life.

15. *Is there much opportunity in Summer Stock? Opera Orchestras? Recordings?*

Replies were: Summer Stock no, Opera yes, but limited, Recording yes, but difficult.

Following are some additional comments:

Mildred Dilling: "No one goes to a grocery store which displays no goods for sale. A harpist, like a grocer, must have a large stock of ability in musicianship, fine training in harp technique, in presentation, personality, good humor, adaptability, business sense, good health, dependability."

Alice Dillon: "The most important thing for any harpist is to have the best technique possible. Basic training is a *must*, and knowledge of music, including harmony and theory, is also most important. After three or four years (more if possible) of basic training, I advise my pupils to play. Play anything: play duets with other instruments, become a good accompanist, play in the school or civic orchestras, play all weddings, funerals, teas, etc., possible; try playing with dance bands, anything, but *play*. Get over nervousness by developing confidence as a harpist; find a congenial field. We cannot all be symphony, opera, recording artists, but the field for harp is unlimited. Good harpists are needed and the work will find *them*—not the other way around."

Julia Louise Herrmann: "My engagements consist of symphony (Dallas and Chautauqua) primarily, with many programs and recitals for clubs and churches, commercial recording, some teaching, and incidental music for teas and receptions. I had a TV program of my own in Oklahoma City which consisted of popular (not jazz) and semi-classical with some classics, but it was too 'high-class' to sell after the first 13 weeks of sponsorship."

In concluding the report, my own comments are: In addition to the phases of training mentioned, I would suggest some dramatic work to help develop poise and stage presence and to learn how to *walk* and *bow*. Theatrical make-up is good to know, too, and perhaps a "charm" course would teach all this. Have two or three attractive formals (full skirts and solid colors) especially suited for the harp. Also have glossy prints of "glamour" photographs ready to show, as agencies demand these at once. Before trying the big city, have a large repertoire of popular tunes as well as classical standards.

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## MUTE HARP

Sean Ryan of San Francisco has brought on loan from Ireland the famous Mute Harp which the great Irish poet Thomas Moore is said to have heard and which inspired him to write "The Harp That Once Through Tara's Halls". Almost every harpist plays the musical setting of this famous poem to the air *Gra-machree*.

The harp is being exhibited in the public museums of San Francisco for a year and will then be returned to Ireland. It has been stripped of all but three strings because the owner stipulated in her will that the instrument was not to be played until the day Ireland is one again. She was Maude Gonne McBride, who obtained the harp from William Butler Yeats who was in love with her. When Maude McBride died in 1957 at the age of 99, the harp was willed to Sheila McCurtain, daughter of the former Lord Mayor of Cork.

Irish unity has been a controversial issue for many years, so the harp may not "shed its soul of music" for some time to come. The little harp stands about three feet high and appears to have had about three octaves.



**SEAN RYAN**  
With Mute Harp

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