

In Memoriam: Robert Maxwell

1921-2012

by Samuel Milligan

THE eminent harpist Robert Maxwell died on February 7, 2012, at age 91, in Manhattan. The cause was cancer. A pivotal figure in the world of the harp, he firmly established a place for the instrument in popular music, and his importance in this regard cannot be overestimated. For while there were others in the field, his career, spanning several decades, made his contribution more influential, reinforced by sublime musicianship, not only as a harpist, but as a composer as well.

He was born Max Rosen in the Bronx, April 19, 1921, but would later change his name to Robert Maxwell to avoid confusion, since there was already a prominent violin virtuoso, Max Rosen (1900-1958) before the public.

Robert came to the harp rather by accident. In 1928, a group of philanthropists, concerned that most professional musicians in this country were European, established a Philharmonic Scholarship Committee to foster serious music study among children in New York City. Examiners went to grammar schools and administered the recently developed Seashore Musical Aptitude Test to the students. A school would be assigned a particular instrument, and Robert's two older brothers, Myor and Abe, happened to be students in the school where harp was to be the featured instrument. Scoring well on the test, they both won scholarships to study with Stephanie Goldner Ormandy. Myor was 11 and Abe was 12.

Ormandy was Viennese, the first wife of conductor Eugene Ormandy, both having arrived in New York in 1921 as a violin and harp duo. They soon parted company, he to pursue a career in conducting, while she, by 1928, was principal harpist with the New York Symphony Orchestra (not to be confused with the New York Philharmonic, with which it was amalgamated in that year).



Robert Maxwell performing his solo act at elegant supper clubs in the States and abroad during the glamorous days of the 40's and 50's. Photo by Bruno.

Ringling Brothers

A harp was delivered to the Rosen tenement and Robert watched his brothers practice, then when they were not using the instrument, imitated them on his own. The following spring, Ormandy decided to treat the boys to an afternoon at the circus following their lessons. Robert was of course included and sat quietly by while Myor and Abe each took his turn at the harp. Possibly excited by the prospect of a Saturday afternoon outing, they had some difficulty keeping their minds on the music, somewhat to Ormandy's annoyance. Robert spoke up, announcing that he could play the exercise. Ormandy said, "Well, let's hear you." He repeated what he had learned from watching his brothers.

Impressed with what Robert could do, Ormandy went to the committee and asked that he, too, be awarded a scholarship, which was granted. The scholarships also included study in harmony and counterpoint.

His parents were not compatible, so after his father's departure, his mother, Rose, was left to raise the boys on her own. In spite of money being scarce, nothing was stinted in giving them the best education possible with considerable exposure to good music. She was, in fact, determined that the boys should become musicians. To this end she also served as time keeper, seeing to it that each budding harpist had equal practice time at the instrument. Advantage was also taken of the inexpensive New York Philharmonic concerts at Lewisohn Stadium in July and August, as well as free concerts at the Metropolitan Museum in January and February. And too, there was the wind-up Victrola at home playing his mother's favorites—symphonic music and arias recorded by Enrico Caruso.

First Solo Appearance

In 1934, having just turned 13, Robert was chosen to be a guest soloist with the National Orchestral Association, an orchestra composed of the more advanced students in the Philharmonic Scholarship program. Robert's playing of the Debussy *Dances* elicited a favorable review in the *New York Times*. "The harpist, Max Rosen, a dark sober youth, showed at once a musical personality. It was evident in many a bold phrase and graceful turn of expression."

In September of that same year he began study with Marcel Grandjany with whom he would work until beginning his own professional career in 1938. "It was," he said later, "my great fortune to have had Marcel Grandjany as my mentor during those impressionable and formative years."

The Philharmonic Scholarships may be regarded as a great success, certainly as far as the Rosen family was concerned. In later years, Myor Rosen would spend 25 years as principal harpist with the New York Philharmonic. Abe Rosen, after a time in the Minneapolis orchestra under Dimitri Mitropoulos, returned to New York where he had a long and distinguished career as a single-date player, as well as harpist with one of the two CBS radio and television studio orchestras plus the American Symphony Orchestra.

The World of Popular Music

But Robert's career would head in a different direction. In high school he became friends with Chubby Jackson, who would later be jazz bassist with Woody Herman. This was during the beginning years of the "big band" movement, and the boys would frequent clubs in order to hear such bands as those of Jimmy Lunceford or Count Basie. A particular favorite was Duke Ellington, appearing at the Savoy Ballroom on Lenox Avenue in Harlem. (Admission was an affordable 35 cents.)

Robert became fascinated by improvisation, and his interest was fueled considerably by the work of the singer Ella Fitzgerald. He felt he could do on the harp what she was doing with her voice.

But all this had to be kept secret from his mother, who didn't approve of popular music. She would, of course, have approved when, in 1938, he was invited to be one of four harpists with the NBC Symphony in an all-Wagner program with soloists Helen Traubel and Lauritz Merchior, conducted by Toscanini.

1938 would also see the beginnings of his professional career in popular music. During that time, every radio station of any consequence maintained an orchestra, if only a small one, and upon graduation from high school, Robert was hired as harpist for radio station WTIC in Hartford, Connecticut. This would furnish a good education in popular music, particularly in improvisation. The musicians played from "stock charts" in which the music was presented on a piano-type staff with the melody on top and a basic harmony underneath. The conductor would assign different instruments to various measures, leaving it up to each player to improvise his own part. Robert also worked with guitar parts, which required him to quickly learn to read chord charts.

A New Technique

He also began to feel that the constant reverberation of the harp was somewhat distracting, creating annoying cross harmonies. To avoid this, he developed a technique which featured constant damping previously played notes while playing

subsequent ones. In more complex music the technique can become quite difficult, but results in more easily heard inner voices and produces heightened clarity overall.

While in Hartford, he enrolled in the Hartt School of Music, studying counterpoint while teaching theory to younger students. While there, he met Arthur Fiedler who, in the spring of 1940, invited him to spend a summer at Tanglewood, the Boston Symphony's famous summer camp in the Berkshires. The scholarship included harp studies with Bernard Zighéra and orchestra performances conducted by Serge Koussevitzky. Paul Hindemith and Aaron Copeland were also on the teaching staff. Fellow students included Leonard Bernstein and Lucas Foss.

The Malneck Years

In the fall of 1940, feeling that more opportunities were available in New York City than in Hartford, he returned just in time to find that the popular band leader Matty Malneck was looking for a harpist. Malneck had gone to the Lyon & Healy showroom in the Steinway building on West 57th Street to ask the manager, Harry Hunt, if he knew any harpist who might be qualified. Knowing of Robert's interest in popular music and in improvisation, Hunt recommended him. Robert came up with an ingenious idea for the audition—to borrow the men in Malneck's rhythm section as a backup. With this group Robert played a medley of Jerome Kern melodies and got the job. In fact, the audition went so well that he took the music and the rhythm section to a studio and made his first professional recording. (During his lifetime he would eventually record a total of 33 albums.)

The chance to work with Malneck was a serendipitous career opportunity. Malneck had been employed as both violinist and arranger for the Paul Whiteman orchestra and had recorded with Bix Beiderbecke. (He would also work later as an arranger for Bing Crosby and Johnny Mercer.) Malneck was also a composer, writing such standards of the day as *Goody Goody* and *Stairway to the Stars*. Unlike the more swinging style of Basie or Goodman,

Malneck's music was modeled on the more classy, sophisticated dance style of Paul Whiteman, and so perhaps more suitable for harp. Though touring quite a lot, Malneck's orchestral home base was the Rainbow Room in Manhattan.

Malneck often featured Robert and his harp, cooperating with him on a *Fantasy for Harp*, the main melody of which would later become the major hit *Shangri-La*.

War Years with Rudy Vallee

In December, 1941 war was declared, and the singing star Rudy Vallee became leader of the 11th Naval District Coast Guard Band. Vallee was the first of the "crooners," and would be an important influence later on Bing Crosby, Frank Sinatra and Perry Como. (This being the time before electronic amplification, and Vallee's voice not being particularly strong, he sang through a megaphone which became his trademark.) Hearing Robert play the *Fantasy for Harp* with Malneck's orchestra at a Long Island party hosted by music publisher Irving Mills, Vallee invited Robert to enlist in the Coast Guard, where, after basic training, Vallee had him transferred to his band.

(A personal note—While Robert was fond of Vallee, he would later recall his miserly personality with amusement. He told me, for instance, that when rehearsing at Vallee's home, musicians could refresh themselves with a bottled soft drink, purchased from a machine thoughtfully provided by their tight-fisted host.)

During the war years, the Hollywood Canteen in Los Angeles offered food, dancing and entertainment to servicemen and women, most of whom were on their way to the war in the Pacific. Staffed by film star volunteers, a soldier or sailor might have the opportunity to dance something slow with Rita Hayworth or Marlene Dietrich, or perhaps a samba with Carmen Miranda before embarking overseas. One of the groups featured was Rudy Vallee and his Coast Guard band.

Robert was often featured as soloist with Vallee's group, and during the Canteen appearance played his arrangement of the Liszt *Second Hungarian*

Rhapsody. Harpo Marx heard it and asked Robert to teach it to him. After four weeks Harpo decided that it was beyond him, and admitted that he had wanted to use it in an upcoming film, *A Night in Casablanca*. Robert was then hired to play it for the soundtrack, with Harpo later miming the playing for the camera.

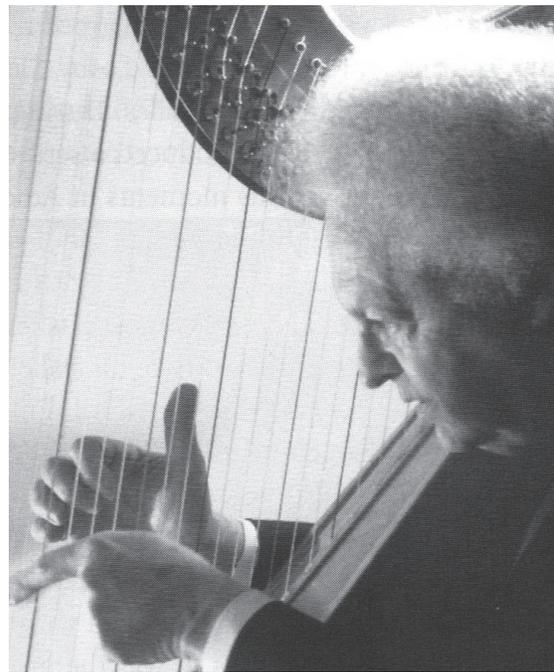
After the recording, the music director, Werner Janssen, rushed over to congratulate Harpo. Nobody offered Robert so much as a “thank you,” nor did his name appear in the movie credits. Justifiably chagrined, he never forgot the slight. But he was somewhat vindicated by *New York Journal American* writer Dorothy Kilgallen, who in her “Voice of Broadway” column for May 22nd, 1946, wrote that “You’ll probably be surprised to learn that the harp solos by Harpo Marx in *A Night in Casablanca* were really dubbed in—face of Harpo Marx, music by Robert Maxwell.”

(Things would go much better in 1950 when he coached Clifton Webb as a harp playing angel in the film *For Heaven’s Sake*. Webb took meticulous care in imitating Robert’s hand movements in playing the *St. Louis Blues*. Moreover, Robert’s contribution was very much appreciated.)

The Supper Club Years

During tours of military installations all over the United States as well as the South Pacific by Vallee and his group, there was speculation among the musicians as to what they would do when peace returned. Robert decided to try a solo career as a supper club player, though that field had rarely, if ever, featured the harp. Armed with a repertory of songs by Gershwin, Porter, Kern and Berlin, plus several original pieces and standard light classics, He entered the next stage of his career, lasting from 1945 until the early 1960’s, touring from 45 to 50 weeks each year.

His first engagement was in Hollywood at Slapsy Maxie’s, a supper club owned by the famous heavyweight boxer Max Rosenbloom, who was in the midst of his second career as a character actor in the movies and who created the club as a place to hang out with fellow film stars. Robert opened there on October 17, 1945.



Robert Maxwell performs a 50th anniversary concert at Carnegie Hall on April 5, 1991. Photo by June Reig.

Supper clubs, very important at the time, were dining establishments furnishing a whole evening’s entertainment, with cocktails, dinner and featured entertainers. During these years Robert made appearances at the Starlight Roof of the Waldorf-Astoria and the Rainbow Room atop the RCA building, both in New York City, Chicago’s Empire Room at the Palmer House, the Top-of-the-Mark in San Francisco, the Last Frontier in Las Vegas, as well as Ciro’s and the Coconut Grove, both in Hollywood.

Reviews were such as any performer dreams of. Will Davidson of the *Chicago Tribune* wrote that “To be succinct, he is wonderful. Maxwell’s talent as a harpist is enormous. He is a sincere and exacting artist whose understanding of music and of his instrument gives his performances an authority that too often is missing in the cafe field.”

Noteworthy praise also came from Nicanor Zabaleta who years later wrote that:

In the early fifties, my wife and I had a free evening in New York. Among the many possibilities our choice fell on Maxwell’s show at the Waldorf Astoria. After so many years we are still able to recall the most pleasant evening we spent seeing and hearing him.

His showmanship was superb, with a most varied repertoire of folkloric and popular tunes. A solid technique and musicianship, of course, made all of this possible. He seemed to have a tasteful arrangement for anything the audience asked for. I am sure he was the successful pioneer of the harp as entertainment in hotels and restaurants throughout the world.

A *Time Magazine* review of 1951 mentions that "There is nothing especially unorthodox in Maxwell's technique; the novelty is in what he uses his big harp for and in his arrangements."

Supper clubs didn't furnish his only venues during this period. He made guest appearances on television shows hosted by Jackie Gleason, Milton Berle, Ed Sullivan, Steve Allen, Jack Paar and Johnny Carson.

In 1953, Robert was heard at the world famous London Palladium in an engagement that also featured Gracie Fields. It was here that he introduced his most famous composition, *Ebb Tide*. A young conductor Frank Chacksfield who was in the audience, came backstage afterward to ask permission to record it. He did so, and that summer it reached number one on the Billboard charts. The music publisher Robbins issued it with added words by lyricist Carl Sigman. It was recorded subsequently by Frank Sinatra, the Boston Pops and several others, and was used as the love theme in the 1962 MGM film *Sweet Bird of Youth*, starring Geraldine Page and Paul Newman. *Ebb Tide* also found a place in Federico Fellini's film *Clowns*.

Sigman's lyrics for *Ebb Tide* having been so successful, the publisher asked him to contribute words to a theme from Robert's earlier *Fantasy for Harp*. This became another super hit, *Shangri-La*. Robert recorded it himself in 1964 for Decca Records. It reached number 15 on the Billboard charts, which astonished Robert, since the popular music world was already being invaded by the Beatles and their imitators. (*Shangri-La* would later become the theme music for Jackie Gleason's television show.)

But there was one more major hit in the works before rock-and-roll totally inundated the world of popular music. This was *Solfeggio*, written for the Ernie Kovacs Show to be played by the "Nairobi

Trio," consisting of Kovacs, Jack Lemmon and Tony Curtis dressed in monkey suits, playing piano, drums and vibes. Robert later recorded it for MGM Records where it achieved a moderate success.

In 1961, he was invited by Hartford station WTIC, where he had begun his career 23 years earlier, to compose a symphonic suite to celebrate the dedication of the station's new Broadcast House. The result was *The Broadcaster*, premiered over the station on November 27th of that year. *New York Times* reviewer Jack Gould wrote "It is both an imaginative and attractive work which the industry might wish to embrace on a broader scale...the second movement contains a waltz that is lovely indeed and could be a hit in itself."

New Directions

Robert had been playing supper clubs for the past 15 years and by the early 1960's was suffering burnout from the constant travel, living in hotels, worrying about the harp arriving in time and in fit condition to play and the obligatory socializing with patrons. And, as mentioned, popular music had taken a new direction with the advent of rock-and-roll with which he felt no affinity.

It happened that in 1964 NBC-TV writer/director June Reig was looking for a composer to score a film she had created. Robert's agent suggested him for the job. She was thrilled that the composer of *Ebb Tide* and *Shangri-La* might be interested. After seeing a screening of the film, he agreed to compose the music. The show, *Kristie*, got good reviews and ratings. It was the beginning of a lasting professional team.

Their next cooperative project was the NBC-TV Christmas Eve Special, *The Heart of Christmas* in which Robert played the Handel *Concerto* with the NBC Symphony, conducted by Skitch Henderson. He also accompanied the Robert Shaw Chorale in the Britten *Ceremony of Carols*. The show was successful enough to be repeated every Christmas for the next five years. Robert's first wife, Victoria, died shortly after that show. Robert and June were married at Thanksgiving in 1969.

Another assignment involved supplying music for *Watch Your Child: the Me Too Show*, with five half-hour shows weekly designed for pre-schoolers and their significant others who were encouraged to watch with them. Children were introduced to music, art, literature and even the weather. This show lasted for two seasons, during which he composed music for about 300 songs. The orchestra consisted of harp, piano, celesta, bell tree, flute, recorder, violin, and a marimba, plus assorted percussion instruments.

Following this, he composed music for several prime-time specials with such performers as Sid Caesar, Bill Cosby, Ed Begley, Ed McMahon, Johnny Carson, and Burl Ives.

In a more serious vein, Robert wrote another symphonic score, *Little Women*, a ballet with narration by Joanne Woodward, danced by the New York City Ballet Company. After deciding tempi with the dancers, he went to Britain to record the score, conducting the London Philharmonic. (A *pas de deux* from this score was based on music originally composed for the wedding of his daughter, Paula.)

To celebrate the bicentennial in 1976, he composed scores for *Go: U.S.A.*, a series of 26 dramas about various events in American revolutionary history.

One of the cooperative efforts of June and Robert still readily available on DVD is the 1978 NBC-TV special *Tut: The Boy King*. Narrated by Orson Welles, it describes the boy king and his time, featuring artifacts from the Tutankhamun exhibition at the National Gallery in Washington, D.C. Robert wrote the music, and June was director and creative consultant for the show, which won a Peabody award and was nominated for an Emmy. Robert considered it one of his best efforts. (*Tut: The Boy King* is available on Monterey Media DVD #346662.)

When Robert Kennedy was assassinated in 1968, all three major networks featured continuous music throughout the day. Robert played his own transcription of a Bach *Chaconne*. The broadcast won a Peabody award for the network.

Robert retired from NBC in 1978. After that, he lived quietly, composing, arranging, rearranging and recording his music, much of it reworked from

earlier versions. *Harping on a Harp*, a CD produced in 2001, contains his most popular works, and is readily available from Vanderbilt Music, which issued it. Vanderbilt can also supply the sheet music for *Ebb Tide*, *Shangri-La*, *Harping on a Harp* and other compositions.

Last Public Appearance

Public performance was no longer a part of his life, but with one notable exception. Harpists attending the 1991 AHS National Conference at George Mason University, Fairfax, Virginia, heard him as the opening recitalist. The performance included new arrangements of some of his familiar compositions, plus his masterful transcription of the *Liebestod* from Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, one of his favorite arrangements.

During this event, Robert and June had lunch with Victor Salvi who told June that "When your husband performed on the Ed Sullivan Shows, he put the harp on the map."

Conclusion

His personality was gentle and unassuming, although he was well aware of his own worth and didn't suffer fools gladly. Living near the theater district in Manhattan, he was able to keep a close eye on modern developments in popular music, much of which he found tasteless and annoying, particularly the lack of good melodic writing.

Looking back over his life, it's hard to imagine a more impressive career. Contemporary harpists who flourish in the field of popular music and jazz owe much to this man who showed the musical public that the harp has a place in that repertory.

Robert is survived by his wife June and by one daughter, Carla, from his first marriage.

Note: This obituary is based largely on two articles from The American Harp Journal, "Robert Maxwell: A Life in Music," by Phillip D. Atteberry in the Winter 2002 issue and "Robert Maxwell: A Profile," by June Reig in the Winter 1986 issue. Other materials are from conversations between Robert and the author over a period of several years, beginning in 1957. ❧