

An Interview with Victor Salvi

by Jane B. Weidensaul

Victor Salvi, the guiding hand behind Les Arts Mécaniques, a Swiss corporation which now owns both the Lyon & Healy and Salvi Harp Companies, is descended from a long line of distinguished musicians and instrument builders. The full history of the family was presented in our Summer 1980 issue (vol. 7/3); I give here just an outline of his life story.

Victor was born in Chicago in the 1920s and took his first harp lessons from his older sister Aida. As a performer, he did freelance radio and solo work, and appeared as soloist with the St. Louis Sinfonietta and the New York Philharmonic Chamber Society. Later, he sat first or second chair for three years with the New York Philharmonic under Mitropoulos and played second harp to Edward Vito in the NBC Symphony under Toscanini. His interest in harp repair and building never waned, however, and the first Salvi harp was produced in New York in 1954. His rise to success was not without struggle, but by 1980, the Salvi harp was a powerful rival of the revered products of Lyon & Healy, a company that has changed hands often in subsequent years. Our interview will shed some light on the acquisition of Lyon & Healy by Les Arts Mécaniques and on Victor Salvi's plans for the future. I am deeply grateful to Della Edling of the London office for her painstaking help in the preparation of the manuscript. —Ed.

Ed.: Victor, much has happened to you and your business over these past eight or nine years. Would you bring us up to date?

Yes, indeed, much has happened in the way of progress on the production side of my business these past nine years. One of the highlights has been the emergence—after years of research and trial—of our Salvi Electronic Harp. We demonstrated this harp most successfully at the Third World Harp Congress in Vienna in 1987, as well as during a three week tour of seven European cities in the fall of 1987. Apart from the electronic harp, we have also brought out several new

models. In addition, after quite a few years of research, we are coming out with improvements which will help us in the future to improve on the sound of the instrument. All this, however, has been eclipsed by the “marriage” between Salvi Harps and Lyon & Healy—this has turned out to be the most interesting event that has happened to me in the past few years.

Ed.: I don't think many would deny that you have achieved the American dream, and that you deserve enormous credit for rising to the top of your field without financial backing or substantial help from anyone. I can remember so well the days of your first showings in New York when there were still so many problems to be overcome. Did you then ever envision being “harpmaker to the world?”

It is very kind of you to make such flattering comments about my past achievements. I was fortunate in being born into a harp family and having instilled in me as a child the love for this instrument. Actually, in many ways I have regretted giving up playing the harp in favor of building them. The compensation for me has been the pleasure I have had in helping to create something beautiful. I think the harp in every way—making it, building it and playing it—has its difficulties but, at the same time, this generates an exceptional interest and love for the instrument. I see it in my staff, the families of our young harpists and also in the harpists themselves. All are exceedingly devoted to the harp—maybe it is because of the instrument itself or the magical sound it produces, or perhaps it is due to the fact that the instrument is so damnably difficult and frustrating for everyone—both player and maker!

As to your comment about being “harpmaker to the world,” I am pleased to have been able to contribute

Victor Salvi with his sister Aida at the 1979 AHS Conference banquet





Rupert Parker demonstrating the Salvi Electronic Harp at the Third World Harp Congress, Vienna, 1987

my share to making harps more readily available than they were thirty years ago.

Ed.: Everyone here was stunned—there is no better word—over the news of the acquisition of Lyon & Healy by Les Arts Mécaniques, and yet perhaps we should not have been. After all, Lyon & Healy had changed hands several times before. When did you learn that the company was once more on the market and what motivated you to make this acquisition?

I heard around June 1987 on the “grapevine” that Lyon & Healy was again on the market and, after great deliberation and consultation with my advisors, made a bid on behalf of Les Arts Mécaniques, which I am happy to say was accepted. As to the motivation, Lyon & Healy was always a formidable company with its many years of making fine quality harps. However, I do believe that L & H suffered in the past from these various take-overs by companies which did not fully understand the harp and its problems. Salvi Harps will benefit greatly in that we will be distributed by Lyon & Healy—a well established and prestigious company—in the USA. By the same token, L & H will benefit by being available through the Salvi outlets in Europe. Therefore, this “marriage” between Salvi and L & H seemed the most sensible solution since the two companies can help each other out to make *one complete and strong whole*.

Ed.: To what extent do you intend to keep the companies independent of one another, and to what extent do you wish to unify their activities in terms of manufacturing, personnel and customer service?

The two makes of harps are completely different—if I might make a comparison: similar to the difference between Steinway and Bösendorfer pianos. All makes

of harps are constructed in a different way and that is what gives each make its own individual character. Therefore, Lyon & Healy will continue to be manufactured in Chicago and Salvi likewise in Italy, carrying on their own traditions as in the past. The personnel are separate but, of course, now *both harp makes in the US as well as in Europe*.

Regarding servicing and repairs—with the unification of the service departments of both companies, we will now have full-time personnel on the road repairing L & H, Salvi and other makes of harps, thereby giving better service to our harpists. Before the acquisition, this would have been impossible, as it was much too costly for a small company to maintain such service facilities.

Ed.: I can certainly see an advantage in terms of service and the supply of spare parts. Will all offices and representatives carry a full line of supplies for both brands?

As far as carrying spare parts is concerned, yes, all offices, agents, and representatives will carry a full selection.

Ed.: Do you have any plans to modify Lyon & Healy harps in any way or to change traditional designs? I remember that when we spoke on the phone last fall, you hoped to improve some of the materials used. Our readers would be interested to know if certain Salvi innovations will be applied.

Absolutely not; we do not plan to change L & H harps in any way. L & H personnel are excellent craftsmen and dedicated to their work—maybe, with my experience as a harpist and many years as a harp maker, we can collaborate and overcome the difficulties of the past years. The combined research of the two companies will bring technical benefits: for example, the use of modern materials in place of the traditional pedal felts will cause them to last longer, and be smoother and more silent in pedal operation. Also, there will be considerable savings made in unified purchases of raw materials which will automatically reflect on the sales prices of both makes of harps.

Ed.: Would you tell us a little about your key new employees, such as Antonio J. Forero and others whose names we should know when we need help?

Antonio J. Forero is my right arm and heads up the Chicago office as well as keeping control of the European and Overseas operations. He was educated in Columbia as well as at Georgetown University, Washington, and has sound business administration and international banking experience behind him. The following Sales Staff operate out of the various offices:

Chicago, USA	Antonio Forero Stephen Fritzmann	(who has been moved into sales after working on the production side for the past twelve years)
	Natalie Bilik	(who also controls L & H publications)
	Jackie Chasse	(music & strings)
St. Croix, Switzerland	Marina Gander Francesca Ciancio	
Piasco, Italy	Carlo Parodi Rosalba Dominici	

