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Interview with Mary Brigid Roman

by Jacqueline Pollauf

Mary Brigid Roman, Associate Professor of Harp at The Florida State University College of Music, heads one of oldest harp departments in the country. After receiving B.M. and M.M. degrees from the Eastman School of Music, she joined the faculty in 1968. As she enters her fiftieth year of teaching at Florida State University, she reflects on her long and varied career in the following interview.

How did you first become involved with the harp?

I became fascinated with the harp when I first saw Eileen Malone play with the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra in the Eastman Theatre. I had a very good view of her playing because at that time the principal harpist sat on the conductor's right, on the edge of the stage. Both she and I are of Irish-American descent. As the harp is the national symbol of Ireland, perhaps this influenced and attracted me to this beautiful instrument.

Where did you study the harp, and who were your primary teachers?

Betty Goldstein Strassenburgh was my primary teacher while she completed her undergraduate work in harp performance at the Eastman School of Music. She came to the Nazareth Academy Conservatory of Music in Rochester, New York to teach harp and I was one of the fortunate students chosen to study with her. I had already been studying piano for two years with Sister Ellen Louise at Holy Rosary Catholic School. She was a member of the Order of Saint Joseph, a teaching order that also taught at Nazareth Academy for girls. When I was in fifth grade, she asked what other instrument I'd like to study and I promptly answered, "the harp." One Saturday morning, my mother told me to put on a dress and walk over to Nazareth Conservatory. Having no idea what this was all about I did as I was told and arrived mid-morning at the conservatory and was ushered into a large parlor in which was ensconced a beautiful gold harp and the sound was entrancing. Of course, I began with *First Harp Book* by Betty Paret, who was my teacher's teacher. Being the oldest of eight children, my family could not afford a harp. So, every day after school, I walked to the conservatory to practice on their harp. Betty Goldstein, who later married Robert Strassenburgh, a prominent Rochester philanthropist, was not only my teacher, but my patron. She encouraged me to audition for the Eastman School of Music. After I was accepted with a scholarship she lent me the money for a Lyon & Healy Style 23 concert grand harp, which she later gave to me as a wedding present. I shall always be grateful to her for her faith in me and her great generosity.

When did you become interested in teaching, as opposed to solely performing, on the harp?

I think the idea of teaching started to germinate when I sat down to play my first C Major scale with one finger; I'll never forget the profound effect it had on me. I clearly remember thinking, "This is the most beautiful sound I have ever heard! The whole world should hear this sound."

During my high school years, my friends and I would attend the Friday night concerts of the renowned Eastman Wind Ensemble under the leadership of their founder, Frederick Fennell. Watching and listening to this great visionary eliciting such electric

sounds from these students, inspired me to devote my life to music and teaching. Later when I attended the Eastman School of Music, I worked on a bachelor's in music education. This enabled me to take method courses from some of the leading pedagogue-performers in the country. I'll never forget the illuminating experience of a coaching session with the viola professor, Francis Tursi, on the *Sonata for Flute, Harp and Viola* by Debussy. With a few words and metaphors, he gave me a concept of the work for which I had been struggling and created a deep appreciation for the music of Debussy. As principal harpist with the Eastman Philharmonia during my graduate studies, I was privileged to play under three twentieth century luminaries, Howard Hanson, Aram Kachaturian and Igor Stravinsky. These experiences influenced the rest of my life.

What brought you to the Florida State University?

During the final semester of my master's degree in harp performance, I began to look for a teaching position at the university level and wrote letters to departments and schools of music across the country. One of them was FSU, where I had been preceded by a former classmate who had unexpectedly left the previous year to join a major symphony orchestra. So, I sent my letter of application and a tape of my master's solo recital. Dean Wiley Housewright, who reviewed me, set up a phone interview, which I took in the phone booth at the Eastman dormitory. He established my potential duties, to teach class piano, keyboard harmony and play in various school ensembles when needed as well as teach harp. We spoke for about an hour and then he hired me.

What was your first year of teaching was like?

It was both inspiring and intimidating. I was the youngest on an august faculty that included Carlisle Floyd, Elena Nikolaidi, Edward Kilenyi, Richard Burgin and Albert Tipton. Most thought I was a student. I also had to quickly learn how to interact and teach students just a few years younger than myself. Dr. Jack Swartz, coordinator of class piano and Dr. Lewis Pankaskie, head of the theory department, were both very encouraging and helpful.

Were there any surprises or big adjustments at FSU?

When Dr. Housewright hired me in the spring, my last name was Callan. So, it was a surprise to the administration when someone named Roman showed up in the fall. In addition to being newly married, the adjustment of moving away from my hometown of Rochester, NY for the first time, and experiencing a very different culture was a bit overwhelming.

Do you feel that your teaching style follows any particular tradition? Did your position at FSU help to develop whatever approach you use?

When I began to teach there were basically two methods in this country, the Salzedo method and the Grandjany method, in which I was trained by Eileen Malone at the Eastman School of Music.

When I came to FSU, I found I had to teach students with different techniques than the one in which I was trained. At first, I taught the method I knew best. However, trying to change years of training under the time constraints of a four-year degree and the assignments of playing for juries, recitals and ensembles, turned out to be a frustrating experience for all involved. So, instead of trying to make the student fit my method, I found it more productive to adapt my teaching to what they already knew. I had been preceded for a year by the professor of harp at Auburn University, Marjorie Tyre, who

had studied with both Grandjany and Salzedo. She had retired from a long held position as harpist with the Metropolitan Opera. A number of years after I had been teaching at FSU, she returned to conduct a regional harp workshop that culminated in a concert of over twenty harps. It was a sight to behold and a sound to be heard that even harpists rarely experience. After watching her teach and play and consulting with her, I began to realize that perhaps the two methods were not mutually exclusive, especially when you consider that both Grandjany and Salzedo studied with the same professor at the Paris Conservatory. In addition, during the early years of my teaching, concert harpists, Nicanor Zabaleta, Osian Ellis and Mildred Dilling all came to FSU and gave recitals and master classes. So, I had an excellent opportunity to study these various approaches to harp technique and began to rethink my *modus operandi*. This required research, trial and error and worry that I was confusing the students, but eventually the lessons became smoother and the conductors of various ensembles were very satisfied with the harp student's work and the students felt as if they were accomplishing their goals.

Your repertoire collection is impressive, to say the least. Is this a by-product of teaching, or something you sought to build? Are there any particular gems in it?

When I arrived at FSU, which was long before the advantages of the internet, I realized that the best way for harp students to enjoy the advantages I had at the Sibley Music Library at Eastman, was to begin augmenting the FSU harp collection. I dreamed of amassing a collection that would include, harp solo and chamber scores, books, publications and recordings. Fortunately, the librarian, Dale Hudson, loved the harp and did all that he could to assist in this goal. This tradition has continued to this day and we now have a collection that I believe has few rivals in this country

Do you have repertoire that you return to repeatedly in teaching, or repertoire that you feel every student should cover, say while working on a bachelor's degree in harp?

Each student who comes to FSU has such individual needs that it is difficult to use a set formula or repertoire in an attempt to help them advance. There are however some works that I feel can enhance anyone's skills, technique and musicianship. I like the *Aria in Classic Style* by Grandjany for large chords, arpeggios and big, resonant tone. For pedal technique I like to use the *Toccata* from "Deux Pieces" by Kachaturian. For suppleness, I turn to *Contemplation* by Renié. And for poetic expression, the *Nocturne, Op. 12, No. 1* by Alfred Holy. Another work I have always appreciated for various techniques is the *Variations Pastorales sur un Vieux Noël* by Samuel-Rousseau. Of course, the Bach transcriptions by Grandjany and Dr. Laura Sherman, teach the language of music and many techniques that are not generally encountered in standard harp literature.

Besides trying to help the student meet the requirements of a degree, my goal is to keep alive and thriving whatever initially attracted the student to the harp. And so I consult with the student and try to ascertain what kind of music engages them emotionally and intellectually before assigning repertoire.

One of the challenges in building any sort of harp program is acquiring and maintaining instruments. Do you have any words of wisdom about this?

I was very fortunate in the help I received in this area from the school administration, colleagues and community harpists. When I arrived, there was an old Lyon & Healy Gold semi-grand harp and a new concert grand Lyon & Healy 23, which

had arrived about a year before after the previous instructor had left. It had never been removed from the case and as sometimes happens, when it was removed, it didn't have a great tone. This was traded for a Salvi Diana. A few years year later, Philip Spurgeon, the college orchestra conductor, found funds for an additional concert grand harp, a Salvi Aurora. For thirty-five years these two harps traveled back and forth across campus to the concert hall for rehearsals and concerts. By the end of that time, they were played out and so Dean Bentley Shellahamer became the driving force behind the purchase of new harps. Several months later, three new Salvi harps arrived. Recently, two additional harps, a gold Lyon & Healy 22 and a Swanson, were donated by community harpists.

Most fortunately, the college had its own harp technician on call, my husband, Victor Roman. He regulated the harps and took care of any emergencies until a few years ago when health issues forced him into retirement. This saved the harps the wear and tear of traveling to the factory in Chicago for repairs and insured that they were always in good regulation.

Technology is evolving so rapidly that it's hard to keep up. Has this changed anything dramatically about the harp world from your perspective?

Coming from an era when one tuned with a tuning fork and had to arrive at the rehearsal hall at least an hour in advance to be able to tune in silence, I appreciate the advantages and limitless opportunities of technology. I am happy to see my students to use it creatively. One of my students was the first in this country to purchase an electric harp and use it as a touring performer in Christian music, here and abroad.

Using technology during lessons has been a great help. I remember during a lesson in which a student was finding difficulty coordinating both hands it occurred to me that she could record one hand on her phone and play the other hand along with the recording. This technique enabled her to hear how the two hands sounded together without the distraction of struggling with coordination. It was exciting to see the difference as she gained confidence.

Also, the internet has been a great boon. The number of teaching and performing videos you can access is astounding. It's like attending a master class every day at any time. If a student is working on a solo, invariably she can find three or four different interpretations from which to learn and get ideas. Or she can access an unfamiliar orchestral part, find a performance of it and be able to watch and follow the conductor. It's something I couldn't have imagined when I was a student.

Have there been any particular performances or collaborations at FSU over the years that you'd like to highlight?

I am most proud of collaborating on a recording of compositions by the legendary Czech harpist and composer Alfred Holý with harpists Judy Sullivan Hicks, Jamie Gossett and renowned organist and esteemed colleague Michael Corzine. Judy Hicks is principal harpist of the Birmingham Symphony Orchestra. Jamie Gossett was for many years second harpist with the Tallahassee Symphony Orchestra. The harp we used for the recording had been rebuilt by my husband, Victor Roman. It had a revolutionary soundboard based on a design for a guitar soundboard by Dr. Michael Kasha, who was head of the FSU Molecular Biophysics Department.

Over the course of several intense days we recorded a number of works, all but one of which was a world premiere recording. My husband and I had previously

published these compositions under the patronage of Artiss de Volt, one of Holý's American protégés. She was the author of his biography "Alfred Holy Memoirs" and had retired from a concert career to Sea Island, Georgia, where we first met her.

I love the combination of flute and harp and have been fortunate to have worked over the years with some faculty flutists, Albert Tipton and Charles Delaney. With Albert I enjoyed recording the Persichetti *Serenade, No. 10 for Flute and Harp* for Pandora Records. Charles Delaney and I often performed on campus and regionally. We were the first, in the United States, to perform the Lutoslawski *Trzy Fragmenty na Flet i Harfe*. They were brought back from Poland by his aunt, a professional double bassist, in the mid-seventies. I also performed this colorful work with Bernard Phillips, who was for several years, principal flutist with the Houston Grand Opera. Together we formed Le Duo Roman/Phillips and were invited by Concerts Atlantique to perform at the International European Festival in Geneva, Switzerland. While there we were honored to perform for an international audience at The Museum of the Red Cross. In another memorable recital sponsored by the Longer Ebony Ensemble in Weill Hall at Carnegie Hall, we performed a world premiere *Night Song* by Leslie Adams.

One of my most exhilarating and unforgettable performances was the Saint-Saëns *Fantasy for Violin and Harp*. I had been asked to play it on the faculty recital of Gerardo Ribeiro. He gave the most electrifying performance I've ever heard of that work and I was thrilled to be a part of it.

Once I gave a recital of the three most often performed works for harp and orchestra, the Ravel *Introduction and Allegro*, the Debussy *Danses Sacrée et Profane* and the Mozart *Concerto for Flute and Harp* with flutist, Charles Delaney, with a wonderful and generous faculty ensemble that was conducted by our orchestral conductor and chairman of the string department, Phillip Spurgeon. Many years later, when he was about to retire, he asked me to play the Ravel on his final faculty chamber orchestra concert. I was deeply honored.

Do you have any students, past or current, with accomplishments that you are particularly proud of, or that hold a special place in your heart?

I am proud of all my students at FSU and the three universities Stetson, Valdosta State, and Mercer, where I have served as adjunct at various times during my tenure at FSU. I feel that each student has brought something unique to the harp and am constantly being amazed and inspired at what they accomplish and what they do with the harp after graduation. Attending their performances is always rewarding and educational. **Is there anything else you would like to draw attention to about your time at FSU?**

FSU has provided a warm and supportive atmosphere in which to grow as a musician and share my love of the harp not only with my students but with many people who love the sound of the harp. My pre-eminent colleagues have been a continuing source of knowledge, inspiration and creativity.

One of the most rewarding aspects of my position at the College of Music, is that my husband chose to become professionally involved with the harp. His constant support for me as a harpist and musician has been a precious gift. There is really, nowhere else that together we could have enjoyed such a fulfilling collaboration.