

IHMP – Post-Class Skype Conference Call

September 19/20, 2008

(6:00 PM to 7:50 PM PDT)

Participating:

Ainslie Allison, Alice Freeman, Michelle Hatton, Aprille Isham, Mona Johnson and Carl Johnson

Home Recording Your Harp

Carl started the discussion with a definition of *acoustics*, a science dealing with the production, effects, and transmission of sound waves. We need to think of the transmission of sound waves through various mediums (including reflection as well as absorption), and the characteristics of the areas where we produce our sound – a home or studio as opposed to a church or auditorium.

In making a harp recording we are picking up analog sound waves and digitizing them. Harp sounds are dense and solid, not cutting or piercing as with a piccolo or clarinet. The sound does not project or carry as far as other instruments. (An orchestra conductor may ask for “less harp” because he doesn’t realize that the sound is actually not being heard beyond the third row of the concert hall.)

Microphones: Microphones for harps must have very good high ranges and very good low ranges. Many of the harp CDs of the 80s did not sound particularly good because the technology was not there to pick up the entire range of the instrument. Something that works well recording a guitar just doesn’t cut it with a harp.

Recordings can be made with microphones or pickups (attached to the harp sound boards or placed inside the harp). Microphone placement is critical and you will have to experiment to get the sound you want. Microphones in front of the harp can record a lot of finger buzzes if they are too close to the instrument. Position the mic front and center of the harp but not too close to the soundboard. Also watch which direction the soundboard is actually facing. Microphones in back of the instrument have fewer problems with buzzes, but may not pick up a balanced tone (too much treble or too much bass). Pickups on the other hand can really expand the bass sound and are not good for some players.

When you pick a place to mount your mic, a *Samson SP01 Spider Shockmount* can help immensely in preventing extraneous sounds (footsteps, etc.) from being picked up by the microphone. Carl considers this a very important piece of home recording equipment.

The quality of the microphone is extremely important in making good recordings. Carl recommends the *Samson C01UCW USB Condenser Microphone*.

Location: Where you do your recording is also extremely important. You may not notice it, but something as quiet as a refrigerator or freezer coming on can be very noticeable in a recording made in an otherwise quiet room. Barking dogs and vehicles zooming down the street can also be easily picked up by a good microphone. If you are recording in your own home, think about which room would be best and what time of day is quietest.

Recording Equipment: With home recording you have several options (1) recording to a device like a mini disc recorder and transferring the recorded file to a computer, (2) recording to device like one of the Boss digital recorders (some even have built in CD burners), or (3) recording directly to your computer.

The problem with Option 1 is that it is like making a copy of a copy of a copy. The more times you get removed from the original, the poorer the end result will be.

Boss digital recorders have been around for many years. Carl considers them okay for making a demo CD, but he would not use them to make a recording he wanted to sell.

Option 3, recording directly to your computer, requires software to be installed on your computer that can capture the sound from the microphone. The Samson microphone referred to above is a good choice because it comes with a 10-foot USB cable and can be connected directly to your computer's USB port, by-passing the lower quality audio jack.

Sound Editing Software: Once you have made your recording they are rarely perfect and you will want to edit the result. This can become an extremely time-consuming and addicting hobby. In his Microsoft Windows environment, Carl prefers to use Adobe Audition. (Although many Adobe products are also available for Macs, this one appears to only run under Windows.) The advantage of this software is that it has excellent multi-tracking and mixing capabilities. Carl can record himself on two different harps and then combine the results on the computer. Audition is a pricy program, but has a lot of capabilities in addition to the multi-tracking like pitch correction and erasing extraneous pops.

Demo CDs: Carl burns these on his computer and uses CD Stomper for an elegant label.

If you are interested in learning more about recording, Carl recommended *Modern Recording Techniques Sixth Edition* by David Miles Huber & Robert A. Runstein, published by Focal Press, ISBN: 0240806255. (<http://www.modrec.com/index.html>)

Studio Recording Your Harp

If you don't want to spend the time learning how to edit and fine tune your recordings on your own computer, another alternative is working with a sound studio. Here are some tips for working with a studio.

- Practice and record yourself multiple times at home. Even a tape recorder will help get you used to working in front of a microphone.
- Don't go into the studio until you are totally prepared. Plan on doing just one piece in a session.
- If you have choices, interview multiple engineers to find someone who is experienced in recording acoustic instruments. Ask to hear samples of their work.
- Take in sample CDs that you like for the engineer to hear. Show them the kind of sound you want to achieve.
- Expect to pay \$60 to \$75 per hour (unless you live in Laramie, Wyoming!)

- Expect to spend 3 hours of prep time to get 10 minutes of a finished track. This includes setup, tuning, recording, tuning again, and recording again if necessary. Very few people can put down a satisfactory track in one take.
- Tune before you go, tune after you've been in the studio for at least 30 minutes, tune again before you start playing and on every break. Bring the best possible electronic tuner you can afford.
- With a lever harp, consider possibly tuning the harp to the key you want to play in (with all levers down) instead of playing with the levers engaged. You often will get a better tone that way.
- Always give yourself more time than you think you will need and take adequate breaks.

Carl's notes that he sent before our Skype chat can be found at <http://windandroses.com/IHMP/CJRecordingInfo.pdf>.

Alice's Home Recording Suggestions

Since I use archaic technology, I have been watching the Internet harp and hammered dulcimer Listservs since March 2007 to see what other people are using and recommending. An article summarizing these tips can be found at <http://windandroses.com/IHMP/AFRecordingTips.pdf>.

The first section lists four brands of digital recorders that can be used to record workshop sessions, lessons, and home playing. The technology is newer than the mini discs I have been using, but the quality is only as good as the microphone.

The second section lists a Tascam Interface that John Gill at Melody's Traditional Music and Harp Shoppe recommends for recording to a computer.

The third section lists microphones. The first one is the same model Samson that Carl recommends. Stephen Vardy, husband of harpist Alison Vardy, has an excellent reference page about microphones on their Web site at <http://www.alisonvardy.com/harp-info/harp-amplification-microphones.htm>

Then I list four sound editing programs for working with your recordings on the computer. I use Polderbits, but there are no multi-tracking or mixing capabilities. You just edit the one track you recorded.

I import my tracks into MusicMatch Jukebox and use that to burn the CDs on my computer. I have had four brides in the last year use my demo CD to choose the music I created this way for their weddings. The only complaints I received were that they would have preferred full length tracks because 30-40 seconds was too short sometimes to hear what the music really sounded like. I won't give them full length tracks because they may use the CD and not hire me at all for the event. I always include a disclaimer with my CDs that they may not play in every CD player. For instance, my sister-in-law couldn't play the CD in her car stereo, but it worked just fine at home.

Finally, if you do go the route of creating a full-length CD and want to duplicate and sell it, there are at least four disc manufacturing businesses (in the US). I have included several pages of opinions from multiple harp and hammered dulcimer players.

Another option to Carl's CD Stomper is buying a printer that can specifically print on CDs.

Other Tips

Michelle reminded us that if we want to send iTunes to other people you get better quality by upping the compression.

Recording with a Macintosh

Aprille provided the following information. She purchased a MicFlex several months ago and uses it intermittently to record on her Mac using Garage Band. You can view it online at <http://Mac-Pro.com> or <http://tinyurl.com/4lfc3z>. It's a handy flexible metal piece with a microphone end on an adjustable neck. It also comes with a gizmo you can attach it to - to put it in the middle of the room or the middle of your harp. \$39.99 US dollars.

Directions for recording a harp:

1. Plug in the Mac Mice microphone – make sure all other Mac programs are off to save energy and record smoothly
2. Go to Garage Band open - Create a Project
3. Erase the automatic piano track
4. Get a New Track
5. Select Real Instrument – String Ensemble - choose the Harp icon
6. Double check in Garage Band Select Preferences – choose USB for input & device
7. Test Drive for sound check – turn off metronome as needed
8. Record to your heart's content

Need Humility? Record yourself!

Round-Robin – What Are We Doing?

Michelle is back from her month-long trip to Alaska. She was very encouraged about some good leads on doing bedside harp playing and they looked at some land they might buy. Her family will be moving back to Alaska about a year from now.

Mona has not had much time for bedside playing. Besides her regular job as an accountant in the Political Science Department at Northwestern University, she has been hired to teach German classes. Mona and Carl will be in joining Stella on October 4th in Redwing, Minnesota. Stella is presenting a full day of workshops for healing musicians and Mona and Carl will be playing in a concert that evening. Redwing is the home of Hobgoblin Music, makers of Stoney End harps. See <http://www.stoneyend.com/loft.html> for a lovely picture of where the Johnsons will be playing.

Ainslie has been volunteering and continuing to play. On Tuesday at Bethesda her playing was of great benefit to the family of a dying patient. The woman was tense when Ainslie came into the room, and Ainslie immediately sensed that the end was near for her. The woman visibly

relaxed after only five minutes of playing and died a very peaceful death. The atmosphere was very calm (due a lot to the music, I suspect). The son hugged Ainslie afterwards and she could hear him making phone calls to relatives, telling them about this wonderful woman who came and played her harp for them right at the end.

Aprille is exploring job opportunities (looking to play for pay) and has many irons in the fire right now – Hospice is a possibility, Windsor Gardens has seven other facilities (pricing would depend on driving distances), and another facility (I didn't catch the name) that she visited with a friend and it had a harp picture on the wall. They might also be interested in having her work there.

Alice has been working on a proposal for approaching our local hospital with healing music and has very much appreciated Aprille's help and willingness to practice "cold calls" with me. I mailed a letter to the hospital CEO, but I am going to have to follow it up with a phone call and so far, I have had very cold feet. I am awfully busy with harp gigs (a University reception, private birthday party, and two weddings within a five-week period), so I have been using that as an excuse for not pursuing my healing music career.

I also had a rather funny conversation with our local nursing home director who had no money to pay me but thought maybe I could register as a provider with the Federal Health Care System (Medicaid and Medicare) and get paid that way. Well, as near as I can tell they do not pay massage therapists, chiropractors or music therapists, so I don't think there is any possibility they are going to pay a healing musician. Then two days later, the nursing home called me with a paying patient whose family had established a trust fund for just these kinds of extraneous expenses which would not otherwise be covered by Medicaid. All I have to do is bill the nursing home once a month, which should not be difficult. So lo-and-behold, I actually have one paying customer!

What We Are Reading:

Aprille recommended *Talking to Alzheimer's: Simple Ways to Connect When You Visit with a Family Member or Friend* by Claudia Strauss. Copyright 2001. Distributed in paperback in the USA by Publishers Group West; in Australia by Boobook. ISBN: 1-57224-270-1

Live Shared Harp Music:

Aprille played **Gentry's Gait** from the Book *Making Music for Folk Harp* by Susan Raimond. Rated at a beginning level, this book is published by Mel Bay and comes with a CD. The ISBN 10 is 0786629673. The ISBN 13 is 9780786629671.

Mona played **Complainte de la blanche biche (The White Doe's Complaint)** from Dominig Bouchaud's book *Panorama de la Harpe Celtique*. The book contains a nice mixture of Celtic (many Breton songs, but also Irish) and classical pieces from the Middle Ages, Renaissance, Baroque and Romantic periods all nicely arranged with fingerings. Rated intermediate to advanced, this book is intended for lever harps and is published by Editions Musicales Transatlantiques.

Then we had a special treat when Carl played a Triplett 33-wire-strung harp (not with his nails) and then a strathspey on his double harp.

Proposed Topic for October:

Suggested by Alison: *Harp Circles*: How do you start one? How do you maintain one? How often should they meet? What about music? Should you create a harp circle library? What are good books to have in a library? Should you make copies of music to share? Do you need to have dues or a business organization? Are there advantages to being a chapter of the International Society of Folk Harpers and Craftsmen? What are the advantages in having a Web site? What's the difference between a "session" and a harp circle? Is food important?

If you are reading any good books, bring the titles to share. And how about Ainslie and Alison planning on sharing a harp tune with us in October?

Date for October Skype Chat:

Friday/Saturday, October 10/11; 6:00 PM to 7:30 PM PDT

Web Site <http://windandroses.com/ihmpmusic.htm>

Please let me know if there are any additions or corrections to the notes for this conference call.

Respectfully submitted, Alice Freeman