

This article by Nancy Hurrell was first published in the July 2014 issue of the Sylvia Woods Harp Center e-Newsletter

You can find Nancy's PDFs at www.harpcenter.com/Hurrell



In early music circles it's common to hear, 'So, when was your conversion?' Mine came in 1991 at the World Harp Festival in Wales, when I heard Gothic Voices perform. The concert was in Llandaff Cathedral, and Christopher Page accompanied singers on a small medieval harp. It blew me away, so much meaning in the music with fewer notes on a small harp. The excessive superficial notes heard in romantic harp music were absent. The clear sound of the harp, with its perfect 4ths and 5ths was exquisite. Soon after, I ordered a medieval harp from England and started attending Historical Harp Society workshops to learn technique and history of the early harp.



My passion led us to move to Boston in 2000, a mecca for early music. I began a fantastic collaboration working with the historical harp collection at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, re-stringing and playing the harps and giving gallery talks. My interest in harp history began years ago in grad school getting my masters in harp. After writing a paper on the history of the harp I've been fascinated ever since. I've examined many rare harps in museums and have assisted curators in the US, England and Ireland with information for their databases.

Last year I was the guest curator for the exhibition, "The Harp: A Global Story of Man, Music & Medicine," at the Museum of Making Music in Carlsbad, CA. In the job, lasting six months, I proposed themes, helped locate harps for the show and composed information panels. The exhibit brought together twenty harps from various cultures and periods in a unique pageant of shapes, sizes and decorative styles.



My special interest is Irish harp history and the maker John Egan, and I perform on a 200 year old Egan harp, with a lovely unique, old sound. I'm working on a book on the maker, and I was recently interviewed for an Irish radio program on Egan, to be broadcast in July on RTE Lyric FM.



I love performing and the first early music group I played in was Renaissonics, with recorders, lute, violin, cello and harpsichord. I also took my harp on the subway (the T) once a month to Cambridge to play in a band for Renaissance dances where the dance steps were taught. I acquired a Renaissance harp replica and eventually came to play other harps in various ensembles, including the Italian double-row and the Spanish cross-strung, each with its own special sound that fits

the repertoire. Playing Renaissance harps, I was aware of the lack of published solo music arranged for it. I began to adapt some of the great tunes we were performing in ensembles and also scoured the excellent college

libraries in the city for lute and keyboard gems suitable for harp, and I published my *Historical Harp Collection, Volume 1*, with *Volume 2* a few years later.

Performing in early music ensembles, I create my own harp parts and enjoy the interesting dissonances and fast moving harmonies in early music. I've tried to bring these qualities to my Historical Harp Collections, to capture the essence and flavor of a period to make the arrangements satisfying to play. To simplify the harmonies, much would be lost, but I've also tried to make them easily playable as well. Arranged for historical harps, I make sure the music works just as well on Celtic harp and pedal harp. In fact, I was harpist for tea at the Boston Ritz Hotel for five years and played my Historical Harp Collections on pedal harp as part of my set! People recognized the lute pieces from Respighi's 'Ancient Airs and Dances', and the guests loved the lively bransles and canaries! The catchy rhythms provide a fun contrast in a harp set.

At the Somerset Harp Festivals, we've even danced to my arrangements at the Renaissance Balls, donning our costumes and imagining another era. Perhaps some of you might even get hooked, as I did, on syncopated rhythms and dancing pavaues, imagining life in the royal courts of long ago...

- Nancy Hurrell



Watch a YouTube video of Nancy with her seven harps here:
<https://youtu.be/4S2clbPzKz4>