

This article by William Mahan was first published in the July 2020 issue of the Sylvia Woods Harp Center e-Newsletter



You can find William's PDFs at www.harpcenter.com/Mahan

Ours was a musical family. My mother sang and played the piano. My father had a beautiful voice, and my sister could sing and harmonize in alto. By five years old, I could sing and yodel like Gene Autry, my childhood hero. At age ten, my mother wanted me to take piano lessons at school. To Sister Anne's great consternation, I learned how to play by ear but not how to read music. In high school, I borrowed a ukulele from my girlfriend's mother and learned to chord a couple of tunes. When I was drafted into the army in 1953, I bought a baritone uke, and one of my army buddies taught me a few more chords. While in architectural school at Iowa State University in 1957, I purchased a guitar and learned the five easy chords; E, E7, A, D, and B7. They fit the range of my voice and allowed me to sing my favorite folk songs: *Jamaica Farewell*, *Sloop John B*, *Me and Bobby McGee*, and several others. I also fell in love with classical music and began a collection of records spanning from Bach to Rachmaninoff. However, I still have hundreds of charming and romantic popular songs of the 40's and 50's spinning in my head all the time.

In 1974 we bought a spinet piano, and I took an Adult Ed class in Improvisational Piano. Our class learned C, F and G chords in the bass to harmonize with many popular songs in the key of C, along with similar accompanying chords in the keys of G and D. We learned the beginning basics of reading music; at least where middle C, E, G, B, etc. were on a musical staff. I impressed the teacher by composing an original song. As usual, I played it by ear, so I have no written copy of what it was.

After the class, I lapsed back into my laziness and didn't practice, and soon the piano was seldom used. Occasionally, I would sit down and play a couple of pieces by ear. I returned to the guitar and the several songs that I could play and sing.



The Folk Mote Music Store was in downtown Santa Barbara, selling folk harps, guitars, banjos, and other folk instruments. As I walked by the store one afternoon in 1990, I looked through the window and saw a young lady playing a beautiful harp. I stepped inside to listen to the music. She touched the strings with such ease that the music seemed to flow from her fingers. I didn't recognize the song, but it was charming. When she finished, I stepped forward and asked her the name of the piece.

"*The Grenadier and the Lady*," she said. "It's in Sylvia Woods' [Teach Yourself to Play the Folk Harp](#) book."

"And did you teach yourself to play?" I asked.

"No," she said. "I'm using the book and taking lessons from a harp teacher, Barbara Hilaire."

"That is certainly a beautiful harp," I said. "Yes," she sighed, "I wish that I could afford it."

I purchased that harp several days later. It had 33 strings, made by James Rydeki, a renowned harp maker in the '70's and '80's. At home, I tried to play it by ear, but that didn't work. It is not like a piano where you are looking down at your hands and can see where everything is. It wouldn't play for me. It sat in the living room for several months before I yielded to the reality that I was going to have to take harp lessons.

In a little guest house on her parents' estate in Montecito, surrounded by 14 harps and 20 cats, Barbara Hilaire gave harp lessons, teaching her students to read music and pluck the strings correctly. Young students come to it quite easily, but at age 58, my eye-to-fingers coordination was very creaky. Still, I was able to memorize the music before each next lesson. We progressed through the book, and on page 40, we came to my favorite song, *The Grenadier and the Lady*. But I thought it was too short; only 16 measures. With the melody spinning around in my head, I composed an introduction for my next lesson. The following week I added an ending, and Barbara was very pleased. I had expanded the song to 42 measures, and it now felt like a real piece of music. I eventually added variations, expanding it to 108 measures, and numbering it my first work, *Opus 1*.

Next, we were working on a piece in the key of G whose melody I didn't care for, but I liked the bass very much. I composed a new melody for the bass and played it in our following lesson: *Song in G, Opus 2*. Once again, Barbara was very supportive.

Next, I composed a completely original song, *Canyon, Opus 3*, and Barbara was ecstatic. The music then started to pour forth every week: *Autumn's Waltz, Opus 4*, *My Hometown, Opus 5*, and *Warm Sienna, Opus 6*. I composed *Far Across the Ocean, Opus 7* in the key of D. I was playing it for Barbara with great gusto -- by ear, of course -- when suddenly, I lost my way.

"Barbara, where am I?"

"I don't know," she said. "I'm mesmerized."

Later, I asked her to play it back to me, as I often did, so I could just listen to the music without worrying about playing. At the end of the session, as my fingers were thoughtlessly wandering over the strings, I heard a theme.

"Did you hear that, Barbara?" I asked. She hadn't, so I played it again.

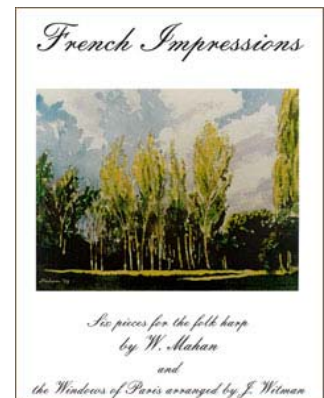
"Doesn't that sound impressionistic?" She agreed that it did.

"Barbara," I said, "next week, I'm going to bring you an impressionistic piece."



The music, which I entitled *Les Fenetres de Paris* and later *The Windows of Paris*, seemed to write itself. Each measure anticipated what the next would be. It just flowed from my fingers into the score. When I played it for Barbara, she said, "Oh, Bill, we have to publish that in the *Folk Harp Journal*." We did, and I received thank you notes from all over the country, and several requests from harpers to record it on their upcoming CDs. I was overwhelmed. It was the beginning of a new endeavor for me. Twenty-one books of music later, and presently working on Opus 130, it has been one of the most enjoyable and rewarding adventures of my life.

Along with thanking Barbara for all of her patience and encouragement, I must tell you how lucky I was to become befriended by Mary Radspinner, my editor and publisher. Without her support and assistance to my music, I wouldn't be where I am today.



On a personal note, we live in a house that I designed 36 years ago for my wife Nyna, and myself. It is in the foothills above Mission Santa Barbara. We share it with our dog Hauzer the Schnauzer, and three cats. Between the two of us, we have five stepchildren and seven grandchildren.

P.S. This 2002 photo of our family was taken when we were renting Charo Cugat's (Xavier Cugat's 5th wife) huge beach house west of Hanalei on Kauai. Pictured are Nyna and me, our four daughters, three sons-in-law, and seven grandchildren.