



# HARP

## A Brief Portrait of Carlos Salzedo

by Saul Davis

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Carlos Salzedo was recognized internationally as the most outstanding virtuoso harpist of his time and as one of the finest pianists and conductors among his peers. His standing as a composer is neglected only because his most important works were composed for the harp and thusly tied to his identity as a performer. Study of his compositions for their creativity, instrumentation, form, and harmony reveals them to be significant and innovative works.

In his performances, compositions, and even his designs for the harp, Salzedo forged a new esthetic identity for the harp as a modern, masculine, fully sonorous, and versatile instrument. His conception of the harp bests the piano and rivals the organ in scope and color, and surpasses the piano in the performance of many types of Baroque music. He rendered inescapable the acceptance of the harp as a solo medium equal to other instruments. No one artist, not even Segovia, so completely transformed an instrument, opening an entirely new perception of its resources and abilities.

Salzedo changed the very way of listening to the harp by emphasizing its nature as a sustaining instrument producing infinite combinations of audible overtones, and by opening up its voicing of chords and arpeggios, greatly extending its range of tone coloration from about six to at least thirty-seven distinct colorations. At the same time he created a consistent, accurate, editorially professional system of their precise and rhythmical notation.

Salzedo essentially forged a new style of composing, a type of music taken up by other composers, with unexplored implications for 20<sup>th</sup>-century music. Composers who have composed successfully in his style include most notably Andre Caplet, Vincent Persichetti, Wallingford Riegger, Harry Somers and Pierre Boulez. Aaron Copland wrote very little for harp, but his close acquaintance with Salzedo and his music may have been a source of his adoption, in his mature style, of music composed

of large, open intervals and sonority that resulted in his famed “American” sound.

Salzedo was an innovator of harp technique as well. He naturally utilized the advantages of his superlative piano technique in his harp technique, slightly altering his hand position from the traditional by slightly raising his thumbs and introducing gestures. He was not aware he was doing this, says Lucile Lawrence, until an audience member came up to him after a concert at Aeolian Hall in Manhattan and complimented him on his gestures and what beautiful tone he got as a result.



Carlos Salzedo

After hearing this, Salzedo began observing himself in a mirror while playing, and realizing their value, he began incorporating gestures as an integral part of his technique. He spent long hours discussing this with Vaslav Nijinsky, the legendary “God of the Dance.” They called it “instrumental esthetics” and together they arrived at a set of specific movements, cued to the musical requirement, that were most effective. Of all the possible directions, they found that raising the hand upwards after playing was the most esthetic gesture and the best way to project the sound outwardly. (Much later in his life, Salzedo did at one time teach an opening-outward gesture as well.)

Salzedo’s high standards for artistry and execution were reflected in his students and elevated the harp to a position of respect and high regard, due in part to his discrimi-

nating taste in repertoire. Ever the modernist, he literally streamlined the harp’s look, presentation, interpretation, and repertoire. When performing, Salzedo seemed to transcend all limitations of strength, speed, and imagination; he could hold an audience rapt with his vivid interpretations and showmanship of the highest order. He worked with sonority like a great conductor, with mass, contrast, color, volume, and flow as would a sculptor, or a wizard creating electricity from thin air.

Born in the Basque region of southwestern France into a distinguished and ancient Sephardic family, Salzedo studied music at home with his mother, a concert pianist. He had the experiences of a child prodigy who performed for royalty. Later, at the famed Paris Conservatoire, he studied piano with Chopin pupil Charles de Bériot, and harp with Alphonse Hasselmans. No doubt due to his practicing an unbelievable 15 hours a day (7 on piano and 8 on harp) for three weeks out of 4 according to a document in the Curtis archives, he won an unparalleled Premier Prix in both piano and harp on the same day at the age of sixteen! Upon graduation from the Conservatoire, he became a well-known young artist on the harp and piano, and organized his own concert series. He toured for several years, then was brought to America by Toscanini to be his harp soloist at the Metropolitan Opera. Leaving the Opera after several years, he enjoyed a vigorous performing schedule. In the 1920s, a typical season included: coast-to-coast tours with his acclaimed Salzedo Harp Ensemble and the Trio de Lutece, with flutist Georges Barrere and cellists Paul Kefer or Horace Britt; solo appearances with orchestras such as the Philadelphia Orchestra; one or two solo programs in New York and Philadelphia; the organization and preparation of concerts by the International Composers’ Guild with Edgard Varese; finishing it all off with a summer of rest and recreation by composing and teaching at Bar Harbor,

then Seal Harbor, Maine, among the artistic personages of the day, from Stokowski to Harold Bauer.

One of the first teachers to be hired, Salzedo founded the Harp Department at the Curtis Institute of Music, where he was a profound influence upon his students and beyond, both artistically and practically. According to Lucile Lawrence, it was his insistence that all students should receive full scholarships that resulted in the policy that was adopted and remains to this day. Among his students at Curtis was Joan Mainzer, the distinguished former principal harpist of the Minnesota Orchestra. Salzedo taught in the summers in Maine, finally at his famous school in Camden Maine (which continued to operate until 2002) and gave private instruction in his Manhattan studio to which many students flocked, even Harpo Marx! Salzedo's rigorous teaching and performing schedule

continued through the 1950s, despite his activity as a frequent radio and television performer. He recorded several 78s for RCA and a series of LPs for Mercury Records — three solo records and one including duos with Lucile Lawrence. Salzedo was responsible for the establishment of many harp instruction programs around the country including the Henry Street Settlement House of New York. In Philadelphia, he established, with the aid of Edna Phillips, programs in the public school system and the parochial schools; she established the thriving programs in the Settlement Music schools. He continued to teach at Curtis up until his death in 1961.

Available from music dealers are many editions by Carlos Salzedo and Lucile Lawrence, including: *Modern Study of the Harp, Method for the Harp, Pathfinder Studies, The Art of Modulating, The ABC of Harp Playing*, all published by G. Schirmer. Salzedo's

compositions are published by Lyra, Boosey and Hawkes, Theodore Presser and others. Remarkable performances of Salzedo and Lawrence available on CD from International Music Service 1-800-959-LYRA include *Salzedo on the Air*, a compilation of radio broadcasts, and *A Harp Recital by Lucile Lawrence* with music by Salzedo.

*Saul Davis is a harpist and teacher from Philadelphia who studied with Lucile Lawrence. His performances include the world premiere of Salzedo's Prelude in the Nature of an Octave Study and his own Prelude in Memoriam Carlos Salzedo. In addition to composing and editing harp music he contributes to the American Harp Journal, New Music Connoisseur and has been published in Dancemagazine and The New Yorker. †*