



HARP

Teaching in Serbia

by Andrea Stern

This past January I had the great pleasure to spend 8 days teaching harp to very advanced middle school students in Serbia, a province of Yugoslavia. This opportunity came about through my friend Chris Ganglehoff, a PhD graduate of the University of Minnesota School of Music. While Chris was an undergraduate at Yale, studying flute, she made friends with Croatian pianist Dorian Leljak, who now teaches at the Isidor Bajic School in Novi Sad, Serbia. Dorian had an idea for a fundraiser for the school — performances and intensive master classes taught by American musicians. The purpose of the fundraiser was to raise money to restore the school's battered Steinway. Along with Chris and myself, two other Yale alumni flew to Novi Sad, via Munich and Belgrade. Along with local and regional teachers and performers, we were part of the Isidor Bajic Piano Memorial Festival.

Novi Sad ("New Garden") is a lovely city about the size of St. Paul, set on the banks of the Danube River. The city was bombed heavily by NATO forces when war nearly erupted in Kosovo in the mid 90s. Some of the people I met had some bitterness towards former President Clinton, while most made a point to never discuss politics with me. Despite the tragedy surrounding their lives (a decade of war, inter-

national ostracization, a partially ruined economic system), I found the Serbs to be fun, hardworking, talkative, and friendly to Americans.

I was delighted to find that my students were incredibly dedicated. Two of them came from Belgrade, and the others attended Isidor Bajic. I was deeply impressed with their talent, persistence, and overall hard work. I recently found out that two of the 14-year-olds recently won first prizes at a European competition in Paris.

The Isidor Bajic School is a K-9 public arts school, with an enrollment of about 1,000 students. Seven years ago they acquired a used harp from Russia. The harp teacher, Zejlka Sponza, gives two one-hour lessons a week to her students. Her expectations are exceedingly high. Our approaches to teaching couldn't have been more different. She would "observe" my teaching by singing (loudly) along with the students, playing and interjecting comments to me in French. (Even though I speak Spanish, not French, her French was far more comprehensible than her Serbian.)

After a while, I grew to like Zejlka's high spirits and singing. She was supportive of the ideas I had and an avid listener at my performances. She taught some of the same repertoire as I teach — Nadermann,

Andres, Salzedo — as well as some music by Russian and Serbian composers that I had never heard before. All of the students played on photocopied music, as sheet music is prohibitively expensive. Seeing how the students thirsted for new music, I donated most of the music I brought with me, and was happy to see how each student studied the scores and made copies. For example, one evening I brought out some duet music and was thrilled to hear the girls perform the pieces for me the next morning. Mikki Henry, of International Music, had an employee who grew up in Novi Sad, and also donated some music. Strings are also a scarce commodity. The average wage in Serbia is \$250 a month, which equals the cost of a set of gut strings.

After 8 days of non-stop teaching and performing (and being wined and dined nonstop), I spent a couple of days sight-seeing, and then returned to Minneapolis. I keep in touch by e-mail, and recently learned that the piano has received its \$10,000 makeover.

Andrea Stern is a free-lance harpist and teacher in the Twin Cities area. This article was originally written for the local harp society. ‡

Harping on Strings

by Saul Davis

A harp without strings is just a frame; it has to be strung and tuned to come alive. Then it becomes one with the elements, a creature of air and force, all wrapped up in mysteries and physics. There are many kinds of harp strings and many ways of using them. Wire strings, gut strings, nylon strings, synthetic gut strings, and folk harp strings are the main categories. Within them are many subsets. Wires can be standard — silver over silk over steel, or nickel alloy (colored). Gut strings come plain, colored and varnished, or clear varnished. Synthetic guts are new

and are something like a polymer. Nylons come in different gauges (thicknesses) depending on the brand or the gauge selected. Folk harps tend to use light, thin-gauged strings, which can be shorter.

Harp strings are counted from the top down. The highest of the 47 strings are G and F. Since older harps didn't go as high, these are called zero octave or over-octave. The next string down is called 1st octave E. Each octave descends E-D-C-B-A-G-F. This first octave is usually nylon because gut strings need retuning constantly and break

frequently. Nylon also helps these very short strings be heard. In the fifth octave, the last gut string is A, and then the wire strings begin. Once upon a time the 5th octave G was also gut, but it was so thick that it was difficult to play. The last string is 7th octave C, but some smaller harps stop with E or D.

When I got my concert grand harp from Lyon & Healy back in 1979, it came with their standard stringing: nylon strings in the first two octaves, then gut and wires. When I went to Tanglewood to study in 1980 I discovered a lot more about strings. My teacher,

the late Lucile Lawrence, had a fantastically beautiful “gothic” style 3 harp from L & H. On it she had (unheard of!) nylon strings all the way down to middle C (4th octave C), or was it even B? It felt and sounded strange to me, but as my gut strings started fraying and snapping in the heavy humid air of Stockbridge Bowl I saw at least two advantages to nylons — they responded less to the humidity, being nonabsorbent, and they kept in tune longer.

Lucile Lawrence showed me how to use nylon’s increased suppleness to advantage and I began to value their liquidity and clarity. By stopping the strings mid-length, I produced fat, juicy harmonics that hung in the air and floated out. She showed me how to sustain tones even longer and alter their quality. I realized that with more control I’d have a broader palette to work with. This is why, when nylon strings were first developed in the ’40s, after considerable experimentation, Lawrence and Carlos Salzedo decided they were superior to gut strings, even in the third octave.

Nowadays, the gut strings are of much

higher quality (and cost), and with the varnish coating (polyurethane) they last much longer and have a truer pitch. Because the overtones they produce are more diffuse, they are mellower. However, they lack in projection above the fourth octave and their harmonics are unreliable and weak in the upper octaves. They are tighter in tension/feel and require a sharper attack and greater effort. They are also slightly tacky to the touch, and slow down playing by at least ten percent. Nylons can get a bit slippery, especially with sweat and skin oil, which actually helps speed playing. It is a crucial advantage in very fast pieces.

When my harp was being rebuilt, Lyon and Healy sent me a rental harp that had gut strings. After a few months I began changing them to nylon. The difference was obvious. The harp came alive with color and brilliance. I could tune with much more precision. I found I could still get the sound of the gut strings by playing much lower on the string and with a sharp attack.

I have for some time been committed to Pirastro’s nylon strings, particularly the

heavy gauge, for all but the 4th-7th octaves. According to the *Harp Connection* the standard stringing is nylon strings in the 1st octave only. Their strings come in sets, like other suppliers, but none of them have the sets as I use them. I’ve yet to get a good answer; I guess not enough of us are using the “Salzedo standard.”

Harpist Saul Davis was educated at MacPhail School of Music, Macalester College (with Frances Miller and Lynne Aspnes), Tanglewood and Manhattan School of Music and privately with Lucile Lawrence. While in high school Urban Arts Education programs he conducted the Minnesota Orchestra (briefly) three summers under Henry Charles Smith’s tutelage. While a student, his compositions were played by the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra at Macalester College. He continues to perform, teach, write and compose in his present studio in Philadelphia. Several of his compositions were performed at the American Harp Society’s International Conference in June 2004 at the University of Pennsylvania. †