



HARP

Lucile Lawrence

by Saul Davis

Lucile Lawrence Dahlstrom, virtuoso harpist, master teacher, author-editor, died last July. She was 97 years old.

Lucile Lawrence was born February 7, 1907, in New Orleans, Louisiana. She began harp lessons at the age of six, playing on an antique single-action harp that had belonged to her great-grandmother. Her aunt was also a harpist, a serious non-professional musician. At even this early an age, Lucile spent up to four hours practicing harp each day. Her first solo performance was at the age of eight with the New Orleans Junior Philharmonic.

In 1918, the famed Barrere-Salzedo-Britt Trio (Georges Barrere, flute; Carlos Salzedo, harp; Horace Britt, cello) came to New Orleans to perform while on a national tour. An introduction was arranged by way of a note sent backstage for little Lucile to meet Salzedo after the concert. He was nonplussed, to be sure, to find that this was the little girl sitting in the front row, whose out-of-rhythm leg-swinging had been distracting him during the concert. Nevertheless, he was impressed with her and decided he wanted her as a pupil, and that she should study with him that summer. He summered in the musical colony founded by Mary Louis Curtis Bok in Seal Harbor, Maine. Other colonists that summer were artists such as Leopold Stokowski and Olga Samaroff, Ossip and Clara Clemens Gabilowitsch, the Josef Hoffmans, Harold Bauer, and the visiting Vaslav Nijinsky.

After that summer Lucile went to New York for further study with Salzedo, staying in the care of a governess with a great-aunt. After that year, she returned to New Orleans to finish school, wintering there and summering in Maine. She finished high school at the age of fifteen in 1922.

She returned to living and studying in New York. All of her studies were conducted privately; extensive harp lessons with Salzedo, and solfeggio, music history and theory with his close friend and collaborator, Edgard Varese, the legendary composer and conductor. During these teen years she was practicing the harp for four or five hours daily, and also two hours of piano. She also studied French, swimming and

riding. She never earned a degree; in those days private study was perfectly acceptable, indeed preferable.

Lucile made her professional debut at the age of eighteen, in 1925, with a staggering 123-concert tour of Australia and New Zealand with the singer Edna Thomas, in joint recitals. The tour lasted for eight months, and one of the highlights Lucile recounted to me was meeting and becoming a friend of the great violinist Fritz Kreisler, who was also on tour in that region.

She continued to develop a distinguished career as a soloist and harp ensemble leader and member. Her appearances with orchestras include the Cleveland Orchestra, the Chamber Orchestra of Boston (under Slonimsky in the U.S. premiere of Salzedo's *Concerto for Harp and Seven Winds*), the Conductorless Orchestra, the Georges Barrere Ensemble, the Chicago Festival of Chamber Music (in the premiere of Salzedo's *Preambule et Jeux*), and many appearances with Salzedo as duo-harpists, and as first harp in his Salzedo Harp Ensemble.

She formed her own Lawrence Harp Quintette to take on the performance engagements that were too small for Salzedo's seven-harp ensemble. They toured extensively, later turning down representation by Sol Hurok, because of the wear-and-tear of life on the road. She recorded Salzedo's *Concerto for Harp and Seven Winds*, and in the 1950s, one side of an LP for Mercury of harp duos with Salzedo. She performed at the Metropolitan Opera for several seasons, but not wanting it permanently, held onto the position until a special student, Reinhardt Elster, was ready for it. She also turned down the principal harp positions with the Philadelphia Orchestra and the New York Philharmonic. She was the harpist for several years at the new Radio City Music Hall. She performed as a soloist on radio and television, notably on the Firestone television show, in a segment that was miraculously saved from destruction and can now be seen occasionally in

rotation on the Classic Arts Showcase television broadcasts. She performed chamber music frequently, in the New York Trio, with Seymour Barab on cello and Frances Blaisdell flute, and in tours for Young Audiences with Louis Moyses, flute and Rose Geringer, soprano.

In 1927, Lucile Lawrence joined the faculty of the Curtis Institute of Music as Associate Instructor, teaching the first-year students while Salzedo taught the upper-classmen. Due to cutbacks, she was laid off in 1928. She then founded the Harp Department of the Philadelphia Musical Academy. After two successful years there, the Curtis Institute felt they had to rehire her and accept her best pupils as well. She remained on the faculty there until 1933, resigning due to workload pressures.

Miss Lawrence and her mentor, Carlos Salzedo, married in 1928. In 1932 Lucile took the position, due to the financial strictures imposed by the Depression, as first harpist with the Radio City Music Hall orchestra. She and Salzedo had bought a new house in Camden from Mrs. Mary Louise Curtis Bok for Salzedo's summer harp colony, and the payments had to be made. Even with Salzedo's heavy teaching and performing schedule, his income had dropped substantially as the Curtis Institute's generous teaching pay had been cut, and so she had to make money rather than summer in Maine. She played an unrelenting grind of shows and concerts several times a day with ever-changing repertoire that was not without quality or rewarding moments. In fact, she credited this experience for helping her greatly in her professional skill development in sight-reading and quick study.

She began formulating and writing the first of several study methods, the deeply influential *Method for the Harp* with fifteen preludes specially composed by Salzedo to demonstrate a modern approach to learning the instrument and to utilize his new range of tone colors and effects, and comprehensive system of harp notation. One of these preludes, *Chanson dans la Nuit*, has become

one of the most popular pieces ever written for the harp.

The stresses and strains of their dual careers and conflicting standards became difficult and Lawrence and Salzedo divorced in 1936. In 1938, Lucile married Paul Dahlstrom, who also worked at the Radio City Music Hall, in stage mechanical design.

Known as Miss Lawrence to all of her hundreds of pupils, no matter how close, she taught extensively. In addition to teaching at Curtis, she taught at Frank Damosch's Institute of Musical Art in Manhattan (later to merge with Juilliard), the Philadelphia Musical Academy from 1928-30, the Denver College of Music in the summer of 1928, the Mannes College of Music from the 1950s to the 1990s, Boston University from 1967 to 2002 and its Tanglewood Harp Seminar from 1966 to 2001, and the

Manhattan School of Music from 1967 to 2004. She gave master classes around the country, and her last one, sponsored by the Philadelphia Chapter of the American Harp Society, was held in October 2003. She was famous for her four-o'clock in the morning departures by bus from New Jersey to New York to Boston to teach a full day, and then another full day followed by the bus ride home. Her students are important harpists all over the globe.

She continued to perform into the 1970s, and made a double-LP recording of much of the virtuoso solo music by Salzedo, along with the *Sonata for Harp* by C.P.E. Bach, and *Intrada* by Josef Tal. This recording has been re-released on CD through the American Harp Society.

Lucile Lawrence always gave of herself to new music, often performing, coaching

and editing without charge. She worked extensively with composers, helping to edit their music or show what sounds and works best on the harp, and promoting their music. She was encouraging to a developing talent, and an ally to established composers as well. Composers who benefited from her activities include Carlos Salzedo, Dewey Owens, George Perle, John Lessard, Ami Maayani, Josef Tal, Alojz Srebotnjak, Jindrich Feld, Nicolas Flagello, Rudolf Forst, Chou Wen-Chung, Lou Harrison, Erno von Dohnanyi, Charles Fox, and many others, including myself.

Harpist Saul Davis performs, teaches, writes and composes in his present studio in Philadelphia. †