



PERFORMER CORNER

Karen Mueller: Classical Piano Student to International Autoharp Champion

by Elizabeth Prielozny Barnes

Karen Mueller is one of the top autoharp and mountain dulcimer players performing and teaching today. Her exciting and innovative performing style, featuring Appalachian, Celtic and contemporary music, has been applauded by critics and audiences across the U.S. In 2006 she was inducted into the Autoharp Hall of Fame, twenty years after winning the International Autoharp Championship (1986), making her the youngest player recognized for either honor. Karen has recorded four critically-acclaimed solo CDs, is featured on numerous recorded anthologies, and she has authored her own autoharp music anthologies. She maintains a year-round national touring schedule as a performer and workshop leader, and is also quite active in England. With a busy touring schedule as a solo performer and teacher, Karen is based in the Twin Cities and performs and records with Katie McMahon (original lead singer of *Riverdance*) and with the Celtic group *Piper's Crow* (named "Best Acoustic Performer" in the Twin Cities in 2007). An accomplished multi-instrumentalist, Karen also plays and teaches guitar, mandolin and Irish bouzouki in addition to the autoharp and dulcimer. In 2000, the Minnesota Bluegrass and Old-Time Music Association awarded Karen its "Recognition of Excellence."

So why is Karen and her work of interest to string teachers and performers who work in the world of classical music? As somebody who has worked with Karen as a performer and educator I've been amazed at how deeply hearing the traditional Appalachian and Celtic music she performs informs my understanding of the classical music it has influenced. As an educator, it is a revelation to discover how complementary the aurally-based teaching and improvisation-infused performing styles of her traditional music are to the reading-based teaching and exacting standards of classical performing. Further, since Karen began her musical life in the classical world of piano lessons, recitals and competitions but ultimately discovered a different musical path

as a largely self-taught traditional musician, she shows us teachers a different type of satisfaction when our students may choose to embark on fascinating and sometimes completely diverse trajectory from anything we could have imagined. Finally Karen is one of those musical jewels who is an expert in her own worlds of traditional music but in addition, because of her early grounding in classical music practices, she can reach across both worlds of music making and teaching with great clarity and ease.

Karen was raised in Winfield, Kansas, by parents who were themselves educators and musicians in the world of classical music. Her mother started to teach Karen piano at about age 5, and within a few years Karen had moved on to a local piano studio where she often had 2 lessons weekly, performed in monthly recitals, and by her preteen years was involved in piano competitions. She loved to play music of all sorts and was encouraged to bring any music that interested her into her lessons. Even though by high school she was competing in concerto competitions she didn't view this as a professional path, just something that she enjoyed. She was pretty sure that music would always be part of her life, much like it was for her parents.

Karen picked up the guitar as a teenager, and found it to be especially intriguing because it connected her directly to the strings, in a way she'd never felt before. Touching the strings as they vibrated was very satisfying, very soothing in a way piano could never be, simply because the touch of piano keys was a step removed from actually

feeling the strings' vibration. Even though Karen received some formal, classically-based guitar lessons she also spent a good deal of time simply trying to play along with the radio and teaching herself how to play songs that she liked. So unbeknownst to her she was developing her aural skills and working on ear training, even though she didn't consider it work or training, since all she wanted was to learn to play those songs! And even though she didn't formally participate in her school's music programs she came to be known as somebody who could figure things out and pick things

up quickly, so was called upon to play guitar in a variety of settings.

Perhaps one the most significant discoveries of Karen's during this time was the Walnut Valley Festival, a bluegrass festival begun in Winfield by local master guitar maker Stuart Mossman. As the festival grew it also included Irish and Appalachian as well as bluegrass music

and that's where Karen discovered this whole other world of people playing these alternative styles of music, getting together and jamming, playing around the campfire, playing for fun and doing it all without printed music. After several years of attending the festival she started bringing her guitar, wandering around and joining in the jamming. She found it to be a very welcoming and accepting community and also discovered the rest of the musical instruments that she plays today. The festival grew into one of the premiere traditional music festivals in the country. It's now where all of the national championship contests are held, including autoharp,



banjo, fiddle, finger-style guitar, flat-pick guitar, hammer dulcimer, mandolin, and mountain dulcimer. Mark O'Connor won fiddling championships here, and both he and Peter Ostroushko were winners of flat-pick guitar championships. And in 1986 Karen won the autoharp championship at Walnut Valley, which helped launch her onto the national stage.

Touring as a solo artist in traditional music most often interweaves performing and teaching. The great bulk of Karen's touring as a solo musician occurs during the summer, to festivals all over the country like Walnut Valley, and to workshops and gatherings where people come together for a period of time to learn in formal classes led by experts, who in turn also perform concerts, while everybody participates in informal jam sessions. Karen has also brought her skills as performer and teacher to classical musicians and students. She was one of three traditional string music teaching artists who participated in a teaching and learning project Cheryl Paschke and I developed between Young Audiences and three Minneapolis Public School middle school orchestra programs. She also worked with the 3M Orchestra on a concert of American folk and classical music, and most recently worked with the newly-formed Vox Corda String Orchestra to create an intense introduction to Appalachian style fiddling for the members of the professional orchestra that was at the heart of a concert of Appalachian-based folk and string orchestra music. She explains the process of developing arrangements of traditional tunes and teaching fiddle tunes to classical musicians:

“The basic repertoire of dance and fiddle tunes are short, 16-bar tunes with an AABB structure. People will see these written in a fiddle tune collection and think there's nothing there. But what is written down is only the beginning—it's just the rough outline of a piece which is designed to be interpreted with rhythmic pulse and internal dynamics and by developing one's own variations to the tunes. Since most of the music and musicality is not written down, performers are allowed to interpret the music. Developing arrangements of traditional music requires imagination, since what you start with is a simple 16-measure tune. If you're by

yourself you might play it through 3, 4 or 5 times and each time try to vary something (essentially creating variations). If you're playing with others, you trade off melody and playing backup chords. We might decide to play this tune 6 times. I'll start playing the lead, you play backup. Then we exchange places to give each other the chance to develop our breaks (solo variations) and then play it together at the end. So you're using imagination and playing off of what other musicians do to fully develop a tune.

“It's very important, especially as a beginner, to listen to what experienced players do with tunes, either in person or on recordings, to begin to assimilate styles and traditions. The listening element is huge in traditional music. What I've done with orchestras is to teach a fiddle tune by ear, which is a fun experience. Since there is so much internal repetition in the tunes they are pretty easy to learn by ear. Chord structure and form are also key elements to learn. (This music uses just straight major and minor triads.) So we will also play through the chord progression—even just the roots of chords—because the chords are what players use to build their own arrangements of songs, either as the basis for a variation while playing the lead [melody], or while playing in a group to accompany others. Then we begin to uncover the unwritten elements of pulse and dynamics because after all, these are primarily dance tunes. One of the elements that brings a tune to life is simply choosing whether to emphasize beats 1 and 3, or 2 and 4, and this is then done throughout the tune. This decision (which is made in consensus as a group) will affect bowings and techniques for string players. Since dynamics and articulations are not prescribed like they usually are in classical music, musicians choose how to loosen up and put feeling into the music, which is sometimes easier to do with music that is immediately internalized when learning by ear rather than from reading.

“I think a lot of students respond well to fiddle tunes. They're fun,

they're short and easy to digest. String teachers should use this repertoire but with the caveat that it's not just about the tune as it's written in a book. It's about trying out playing by ear, listening to recordings, listening to players experienced in the tradition. It's useful to invest in a couple good recordings and listen to an experienced fiddler while looking at a tune written down. Examine what you see written down, as well as what you hear that isn't, and try to put your finger on what it is you are hearing. Some books already have variations written out, but don't stop there! Try experimenting in the privacy of your own studio—I know as teachers we're extremely busy so time is at a premium—but select a tune for your own personal enjoyment, learn it and then see what comes out of it, without worrying about performing; just play with it a bit.

“One of the most significant musical benefits of studying traditional music in the authentic style is the attention one must pay to the music's internal rhythmic pulse, bowings and accompaniment techniques. This can profoundly strengthen one's internal sense of rhythm. And one of the great byproducts for anybody working in traditional music is a greater awareness of the broader music community beyond classical music and musicians. This is perhaps the greatest gift of all.”

Please visit Karen's website not only for more information about her and her work, but also for links to local and national organizations, schools, artists and resources: www.karenmueller.com.

Chicago native Elizabeth Prielozny Barnes is an orchestra conductor who has also worked extensively in outreach and arts-in-education. Through these experiences she was introduced to some of the extraordinary musicians working outside of the classical music realm. This led her to create Vox Corda (voice of the string), as a way to explore all genres of acoustic string music and offer another facet of string music advocacy. This past season the professional Vox Corda String Orchestra presented its first season of cross-cultural string orchestra concerts. (Visit www.voxcorda.org for more information.) ♪