

Andrea Vigh

The Harp, an Instrument of Many Faces

2008

Budapest

Theses

The **topic** of my dissertation is the development of the harp as a musical instrument and of the way we play it. In a chronological order from prehistoric times to our days, I touch upon important moments from all cultural periods and show the various forms the harp has taken around the world. The aim is to offer an overall picture, relying on archeological objects, works of art and written documents, whenever possible.

This dissertation is **based on** research into already existing publications on the one hand, and into still available actual original instruments, on the other. Participating in the most important harpist events worldwide, such as the World Harp Congress and various festivals, the necessary books, studies and instruments became available to me and I received first-hand information about the most recent research results, which have not yet been made accessible in Hungarian. It was a wonderful experience to see original sheets of music, both printed and in manuscript form; to study the various books of harp methodology and to open collections of harp parts for orchestral works, in which hand written comments of our great predecessors can be still read. I have visited all important manufactures and factories producing harps in Europe so that I could study the historical development of the harp; I have viewed exhibitions of old and new instruments, and explored their mechanisms. All harp producers were extremely supportive; the Salvi and Camac factories kindly allowed material from their catalogues and museums to be represented in this work.

The **aim** of my dissertation is to produce academically researched and supported material about the history of the harp and its great performing artists and to make this material available in Hungarian, so that harp students may use it as a textbook. At the same time, the material is presented with a view to finding its way to non-specialists audiences who like the harp and may want to read a colourful and interesting work about the instrument. Since there has been no such publication in Hungarian, neither side of this twofold aim can be disregarded; even foreign language publications were difficult to access, partly due to high costs and partly because of the scarcity of available books, which were usually published in limited quantities only.

The **method** followed in this dissertation is basically that of chronological documentation. After the great variety of historical instruments from ancient and medieval times, from the 1700s on the harp has gained a more definite form and musical range, through the use of pedal harps. After 1789, the harp left

the circles of fashionable French aristocracy and became the subject of a European fashion trend. The instrument moved into the drawing-rooms of bourgeois families, and the number of professional harpists increased. At the same time, the European centres of harp education were formed and official forms of professional harp education were created. Meanwhile, the harp manufacturers were in strong competition. In 1810 Sebastian Erard built his double pedal harp, which is the form of the instrument we still use, although with slight modifications. Elias Parish Alvars was the great harpist talent who showed the way to the future, using Erard's model. Ever since, the great composers of the day, such as Liszt, Berlioz, Mendelssohn or Wagner were eager to insert harp parts into their compositions. Following the initial difficulties, including scarcity of instruments as well as harpists, Paris became the focal point of new developments again at the turn of the 19th-20th centuries, producing the glorious French School in the history of the harp. In 1894 Pleyel developed his 78-string chromatic harp, with the strings strung across, giving up the idea of the pedal mechanism. This instrument could cover six and a half octaves, and separate classes were founded based on the possibilities offered by the new construction, but the system failed to stand the test of time; Erard's instrument has remained with us throughout the 20th century.

In my dissertation I devote a special chapter to the developments of the international connections of harpists, and especially to the World Harp Congress, first organized in Tel Aviv in 1959, followed by further congresses and competitions every three years. These days there are several international competitions and festivals all over the world.

In the last chapter of my dissertation I discuss the choice of instrument of the greatest contemporary harpists, since this is a defining factor in a performing harpist's career. Students also often seek advice when selecting their instruments, hence the special interest of this aspect.

As a **result** of this dissertation, an overall history of the development of the harp as an instrument has become available in Hungarian: a work that offers fundamental information about the historical periods of the development of the harp and the ways the instrument has been played as well as about the figures of the greatest harpists. With the illustrations and the presentation of the material both the interest of the general readership and the highly specialized needs of harp students have been considered.