

Margaret Bakker - Autoharp Clearinghouse February 1997

The “Musical Autobiography” which follows, by this month’s cover personality **Margaret Bakker**, is so complete that there really isn’t a whole lot that I can add to it. I do believe it was Bonnie Phipps who first put Margaret in touch with me back in the early days of the *Clearinghouse*. Then, during the summer of 1991, Margaret and I were classmates in a wonderful workshop at the Augusta Heritage Center called *Advanced Autoharp Sampler*. Coordinator Becky Blackley had somehow managed to schedule a different instructor for each of the five days in class (Karen Mueller, David Morris, Harvey Reid, Drew Smith, Neal Walters). That week came to a close with the Zimmermann Foundation Autoharp Championship--which, in actuality, was more of a proficiency test than a contest because participants were in competition with a standard of perfection rather than with one another. I recall Margaret as being one of very few people ever to be awarded a blue ribbon in that event. (I received the *People’s Choice* ribbon--which I suspect was the autoharp counterpart of either a *Miss Congeniality* award or a booby prize!)

It is now my pleasure to turn you over to Margaret Bakker--to whom this issue is dedicated. **ER**

I was born in Whittier, California of Quaker (Society of Friends) parents. They were of the pastoral tradition (rather than meeting in silence), and music was an important part of their lives. At age nine, I started violin lessons. It was easy to read the music, but I found intonation to be much more difficult. Eventually, I became part of the family musical trio with my father playing cello and my mother the piano. We had a repertoire of old-time songs such as those by Stephen Foster, and we also played opera arias. Every Saturday, my mother listened to opera on the radio--at which time I was usually happy to be doing things elsewhere. In addition to the cello, my father was able to play the hymn *Under His Wings* on the piano. He taught me funny songs such as *Mary Had a William Goat, His Stomach Was Lined With Zinc*.

From sixth through eighth grades, I was part of a district-wide school violin ensemble in Fullerton, California, where we lived at that time. I also sang in the junior high glee club. But, in high school, I had to make a choice between glee club and orchestra. Orchestra won out because I had to maintain my instrumental skills, and private lessons were no longer in the budget.

As a teenager, I attended summer camp in the beautiful High Sierras, working in the kitchen or as a counselor. I learned many camp songs and hymns both vocally and on the piano. Those numbers were to become my basic repertoire of folk and international music, along with hymns learned at my home church. How I loved those weeks in the mountains, being close to God in nature. Incidentally, a thirteen year old virtuoso pianist was a camper there at that time. His name was Andre Previn and, like many of the other youngsters, he had fled with his family from Hitler’s Germany and settled in the Los Angeles area. Andre managed to practice on the out-of-tune, dusty, mouse-ridden camp piano. Not surprisingly, he became a world-famous pianist and

conductor, after having gotten his start as a background musician for Hollywood films. I gave that camp piano a wide berth when Andre was around, but I **do** have his autograph!

From Fullerton, we moved back to Whittier, where I sang in my church choir. The congregation had a fine organist as well as a very accomplished choir director. I played informally for group hymn singing and occasionally accompanied vocal soloists. At Whittier College, I dropped out of the symphony orchestra and concentrated on a cappella choir. My major was in Philosophy and Sociology, and I was also qualified to teach at the elementary level.

During my first year as a teacher, I discovered the autoharp. Although I didn't know exactly what the instrument was, I thought that it must surely be easier to play than a guitar. I achieved what you might call instant success in respect to strumming chords for classroom singing. I also accompanied the fifth and sixth graders when they did their Mexican songs and dances. (This was a school located in Mexican-American barrio.) Record players were scarce, as were electrical outlets, and the autoharp was portable. As time went on, I stopped teaching for a while in order to get married and raise a family. All during the fifties and sixties I thought about getting an autoharp, but family needs came first. I **did** acquire a piano, which was free except for a twenty dollar moving fee. At that time, I most likely could have purchased an autoharp for the same amount, but figured that I got a lot more strings for my money with the piano.

Many years, four children and a divorce later, I was living in Colorado and teaching third grade. Somewhere around 1971, I found an old autoharp at my school. It was cracked and warped but my new husband, Jakob, installed some strategically-placed screws and...voila..it was once again playable! The music teacher had made it known that she had no use for such a "piece of junk" so, had I not come to its rescue, the 'harp would have ended up in the school district's discard shed.

I played and sang with the kids at school as well as at home--at that time strumming the instrument either flat on my lap or a table. Eventually, I came to know Bonnie Phipps, who put on some autoharp workshops in the late seventies and early eighties. She showed us how to hold our 'harps Appalachian style as Mother Maybelle Carter had done, and also taught her students to play melody and do her cross picking technique as well as just strumming rhythm chords. After that, I attended two concerts by Bryan Bowers and learned still more by observing what he was doing. In 1980, I was finally able to buy a new 15-chord Oscar Schmidt Autoharp for \$140 and, about a year later, acquired a used 1968 B-Model for \$20. Thus began a succession of autoharps in my life. I learned all about the mechanics of the old black A-Models and the variations of the B-Models. In the process, I re-felted, rearranged, and adjusted chord bars to find out what I liked best. Likewise, I restrung autoharps and installed fine tuners. In some instances, I converted chromatic instruments to diatonic--and then back again. When I came into possession of my first 21-chord autoharp, I experimented with the chord bars and assembly in order to get it functioning more smoothly and quietly. I did not mess with the internal structure, nor have I ever had the desire to build an autoharp from scratch.

What I especially liked about playing the autoharp was the lack of codified and elitist rules. There are many ways to play the instrument, and they are all okay. Some methods are better than others, and there are those that work best for me. It has been refreshing to discover my own

way as, for the most part, I learned to play the autoharp without formal lessons. Yet, it was through workshops and group interaction that I refined my technique and progressed in respect to defining my own unique style.

As mentioned, Bonnie Phipps was my first important influence, particularly as a teacher and mentor. Then along came a scientist named Jaap Folmer, who was a flute player and singer of early medieval music. Jaap was from The Netherlands, as is my husband. From him, I learned Dutch, Flemish and German folk tunes, as well as Irish fiddle tunes. Although I wasn't able to play the latter up to speed, I could accompany the flute or voice and play melodically on the slower pieces. At that time, I became really involved with music on the autoharp and spent quite a lot of time practicing. Other significant autoharp-related influences would certainly include Becky Blackley and her magazine *The Autoharpoholic*. I have kept every issue of that publication, and refer back to them regularly. Becky's volume, *The Autoharp Book*, has been invaluable in terms of history and information. My copy is full of my added notes and photographs.

In 1981, I helped organize an autoharp club with assistance from Becky and Bonnie. The group met monthly at the homes of its members. Three years later, I became coordinator for the organization, and we voted to call ourselves the *Denver Area Autoharp Club*. At that time, we were getting together at the *Zither Shop* in south Denver. After that place of business folded in 1990, we moved to the *Swallow Hill Music Association*--and have been meeting there ever since. Through the years, we have put on our own member concerts, and recently made a video tape. We have also sponsored workshops with Bryan Bowers, Karen Mueller, Les Gustafson-Zook, Ivan Stiles, and our own Julie Davis and Roz Brown. Various club members have volunteered our collective talents to perform at the annual *Folkathon* and other Swallow Hill functions. In an effort to earn a little money and to spread the word about our club, we sell autoharp buttons--and expect to have t-shirts available soon.

A few years ago, the Swallow Hill association asked me to participate in their oral history program. I was honored to interview six outstanding local musicians including Julie Davis. Earlier, I had conducted an interview with Roz Brown for *The Autoharpoholic*.

I have attended the Walnut Valley Festival in Winfield, Kansas several times, met autoharp people of note there, and shared wonderful experiences. I would go again if we still had a camper. I always recommend that autoharp players attend the Winfield event at least once.

For twenty-five years, I taught school at the elementary level--mostly to second and third graders. I always kept a 'harp at school and, every morning after the pledge and a patriotic song, the class and I gathered on the rug for fifteen minutes of songs with the autoharp. That time together must have made an impression on those children because any number of them have come to me as grownups and asked if I still play the autoharp. The school where I taught had regular programs of music and talent shows, and my classes always delighted in showing off their repertoire and musical skills.

When I retired from teaching nine years ago, I looked forward to having the time necessary to expand my musical activities. (I also kept my finger in the education pot by doing tutoring.) I

have put on multi-cultural programs for school children in several languages (Spanish in particular). On those occasions, I always got the kids involved and I always included the autoharp. For senior groups, my presentations included playing the many instruments I have collected such as violin, zither, lap dulcimer, Finnish kantele, Indonesian angklung, flutes, thumb piano, drums and a variety of percussion instruments--with the autoharp being featured.

More recently, I directed and played fiddle and autoharp in a string band of retired folks. It was my responsibility to find music for two each fiddles, autoharps, mandolins and guitars. I located a couple of books that worked for the group and, in addition, added chords to some three-part Swedish fiddle music. (I love Scandinavian fiddle music!) We also arranged some old-time tunes to fit our instrumentation. Sadly, the group disbanded because several members moved away and others fell into bad health. I am presently working on organizing another similar unit.

Another special interest of mine is music from New Mexico, early California, Mexico and other Spanish-speaking countries. For my own use, I taped an hour of Spanish-language songs, most of which I had known from my childhood. On the recording, I either played my violin or accompanied myself with the autoharp or folk harp. In addition, I am extremely fond of world and ethnic music, and have a fascination with unusual instruments, harmonies and rhythms.

Presently, I am part of a four-member group which gets together from time to time to play and sing for nursing and retirements homes and other groups. We have two guitarists, a limberjack player and my fiddle and autoharp. On occasion, we have the addition of a washtub bass. Our programs consist of old-time sing-along songs, along with a few personal favorites. At other times, I perform alone or with other autoharps. In addition to my involvement with the autoharp club, I sing in a retired teachers' chorus called the *Keenagers*. Likewise, I remain very active in my church and church choir. At the Swallow Hill Music School, I have taken fiddle lessons, as well as enrolling in other vocal and instrumental sessions. Just recently, I attended the Rocky Mountain Sacred Harp Convention (shape notes) and learned to sing that wonderful four-part unaccompanied harmony. Also at my disposal are regularly-scheduled folk singing jams and parties, as well as an annual instrumental and singing retreat in the mountains known as the Frozen Moon Festival.

I would like to take this opportunity to share a couple of my favorite musical experiences. One was a week at the Augusta Heritage Center in Elkins, West Virginia where I finally met Eileen after having corresponded with her for a number of years. I benefited greatly from the in-depth structure of that week-long autoharp class. And, I just loved the non-stop music around the campus of Davis & Elkins College, as well as having the opportunity to make so many lasting friendships. There are so many musical goings-on in the eastern part of our United States.

Another significant experience was a trip to the Ghost Ranch in northern New Mexico. There, I spent a week with folk musicians Jeanie McLerie and Ken Keppeler, immersed in the old-time Hispanic folk music and dancing of that area--with some Cajun and other traditional music thrown in. For that session, I played fiddle. My husband, who is an artist, was able to enroll in a painting class while we were there

Jakob and I often attend Elderhostel events, usually in our nearby western states. At times, it takes some compromising in order to find classes with which we can both be happy. Outside of music and art, we like to study history and to learn about the local physical and cultural environment. Each of us has four children from our respective previous marriages, and we are blessed with nine grandchildren. Just recently, we celebrated our twenty-eighth wedding anniversary. Although everyone in our family enjoys music, none of them are “into it” to the degree that I am. . .at least not yet.

Eileen asked me to elaborate on the autoharps that I play. At one time, I had seven of them, but have narrowed it down to four for now. One is an American-made Oscar Schmidt instrument that I bought at the Illinois factory just before they moved their operation to Japan (and later, Korea and then China). Five years ago, my husband did decorative painting on the sound board of that 'harp, and I installed fine tuners and a new set of strings. I also have a koa wood *Timbreharp* made right here in Colorado by Mitch Pingel and Randy Barnes. It has quite a few extra chord bars that enable me to play arrangements calling for diminished and other “color” chords. My third autoharp is an Oscar Schmidt *Wildwood Flower*, which is a single-key diatonic instrument in the key of D. I plan to modify it to play in C and A minor, at which time I think it will see more use. For the sake of nostalgia, I have a circa 1963 black Oscar Schmidt A-Model 'harp. Although I have done some experimenting with diatonic autoharps, I find that chromatic instruments are better suited to my repertoire and style of playing.

In addition to the autoharp, I enjoy playing violin/fiddle--especially with other musicians. On that instrument, my tastes lean toward Mozart duets, Telemann canons and the Swedish three-part fiddle tunes previously mentioned. Waltzes and slowly-played Scottish or Irish jigs and reels are also favorites of mine. I own three fiddles and a viola, all of which are antiques. Then, there is my *Dusty Strings* 26-string harp, which I find difficult to play in a group--although I do want to get back into playing it more. My 1913 piano is basic to my sense of harmony and melody. The restored 1870 reed organ represents a trip back to the days when I played hymns on church organs. In a closet, there is a small piano accordion, a mountain dulcimer, various recorders and pennywhistles, and the kantele. The walls of our home are adorned with other instruments, including a Chinese er-hu, a German zither, and a Jakob-decorated mountain dulcimer.

So, I have activities and instruments to keep me happy and busy in retirement. At age seventy, by the grace of God, I look forward to many more old and new satisfying experiences. **MB**

*All things shall perish from under the sky,
Music alone shall live, never to die.*

Those wishing to contact Margaret Bakker may do so at: 1501 South Estes Street, Lakewood, CO 80232 - (303) 986-0769.