

An Interview with Ann Hobson Pilot

by Jane B. Weidensaul

Q. Ann, I have been looking forward to this interview for a very long time. With your story we are moving downward in age bracket to one who is in the prime of a great career, with many years to build on an already most distinguished foundation. For the sake of the history you have made, would you tell us when you were born, where, something of your family background, and—most important of all—how did you come to study the harp?

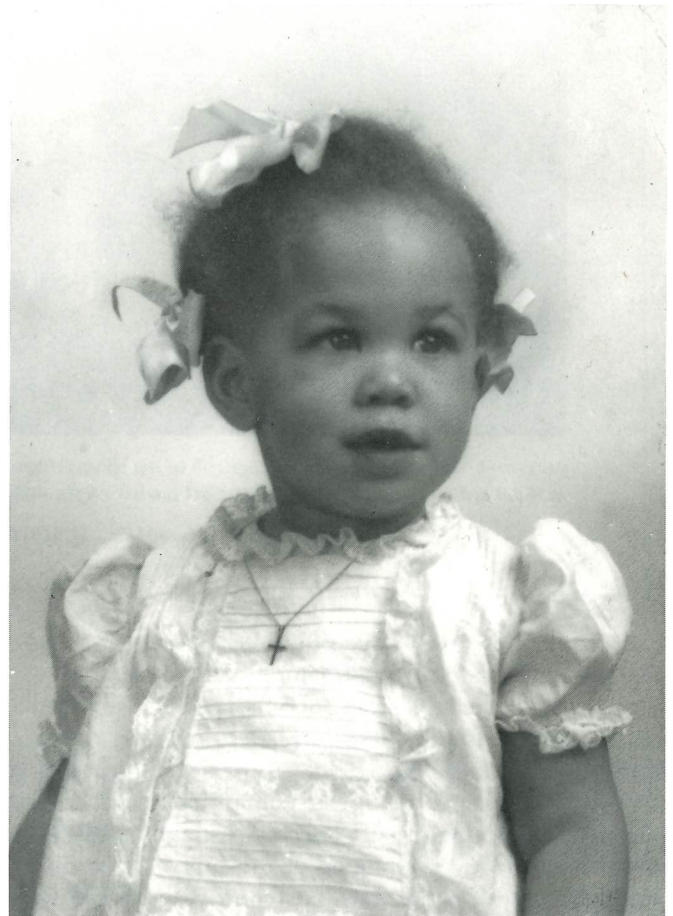
I was born at the close of World War II in Philadelphia. My father was a Captain in the U.S. Army (he later advanced to Lt. Colonel), and my mother was a pianist and a teacher in the Philadelphia public schools. I have one sister who is two years older than I am. When I was five years old, the family moved to Germany to be with my father who was stationed there for about four years. It was there that I began studying the piano, first with my mother and later with other teachers.

At the age of fourteen, I entered the Philadelphia High School for Girls, a public school for advanced students. It was there that I took advantage of their very extensive music program and decided to study the harp, actually my third or fourth choice of instrument. I loved the harp from my very first lesson with Mary Ann Castaldo, and I made rapid progress. My first public performances were in the neighborhood churches, and my first orchestra experiences outside of my high school were with All City Orchestra and an all-black ensemble called the Philadelphia Concert Orchestra.

Q. I note from a newspaper article in my files that you have an impressive array of teachers in your background. Would you tell us how you came to study with each, and give your impressions of those experiences?

Upon graduation from Girls' High, I interviewed several schools in the Philadelphia area. I had decided to stay at home, at least for awhile, to keep the expenses down and because I wanted to study with Marilyn Costello or Edna Phillips, who has been a mentor to me since high school. I finally decided on the Philadelphia Musical Academy. Marilyn Costello was teaching there, and I studied with her for over two years. All during this period I studied the "Salzedo Method," and I did attempt to study with Mr. Salzedo himself in Camden, Maine, the summer before he died. Mr. Salzedo, citing his age and ill health, was afraid to accept a black student in Camden at that time, so I was denied the opportunity to ever have a lesson with him.

In the summer of 1962, however, when Alice Chalfoux became the director of the Salzedo School, I did spend the first of many, many summers in Camden. I was quite taken with her disciplined method of playing the



Ann Hobson as a small child

harp. I was impressed with the large, strong tone that this method seemed to produce and, since I basically wanted to be an orchestral harpist (meaning I wanted to be heard), I continued working with her at the Cleveland Institute of Music (CIM) from which I was graduated in June 1966.

Q. How were you able to make your way in the profession? You had against you the fact that you were not only a woman in an era when orchestras still preferred all-male ensembles, but a minority woman in an era when orchestras were lily-white. My students at the college are amazed to learn that major-league sports teams were only integrated in 1947, and that the great Marian Anderson was made to sit outside diners in the South while her white accompanist went in to buy their food. Members of the audience catcalled when that gallant German gentleman kissed her hand at the end of the recital. Just how long and how hard was the road to the Boston Symphony Orchestra for you?



Ann Hobson Pilot



Ann with her mother and sister Harriet

Actually, the professional road for me was remarkably smooth and without many roadblocks. The disappointments that I have experienced and the racial discrimination that I encountered have not only made me a stronger person, but, I believe, more sensitive to others. I have always had the support of my family, my teachers, and an inner confidence that has enabled me to overcome these obstacles.

I actually had my first professional job before graduating from CIM. During the 1965-66 season when I was a senior, Ms. Chalifoux recommended me for the position of substitute second harp with the Pittsburgh Symphony. I was able to work with such first class conductors as Eugene Ormandy and William Steinberg while still a student, to tour with the orchestra, and to play second to Janet Remington, a seasoned veteran. I had already spent several summers at the Marlboro Music Festival in Vermont where I met and worked with such legendary musicians as Pablo Casals and Rudolf Serkin. In the Fall of 1966, I was asked to substitute as principal harpist of the National Symphony in Washington, DC, to replace Sylvia Meyer who had seriously injured a finger. The appointment was originally for one year, but my stay was extended to three. In the spring of 1969, I was approached by Arthur Fiedler, a frequent guest conductor with the National Symphony, who explained to me that his harpist with the Boston Pops was retiring and he very much liked my playing. He encouraged me to audition for the job which also involved playing second harp with the Boston Symphony. I hesitated because I enjoyed my principal position in Washington, but I did finally decide to compete. After the audition, I was offered the job, accepted, and gradually moved up to associate principal,



Giving a harp demonstration at the National Center for Afro-American Artists in Boston

and then in 1980, I became principal harpist of the Boston Symphony as well as the Pops upon the retirement of Bernard Zighera.

Q. In addition to your orchestral career, you have appeared as a soloist frequently, something not all orchestral players care to do. Tell us of your more significant performances as a soloist, and contrast the demands of the two fields. Do you wish to increase your work as a soloist?

I have chosen to include solo and chamber music work in my career, because I believe it makes me a better and more seasoned harpist and musician. Some of my more significant solo performances include performing the Mozart Flute and Harp Concerto with James Galway for *Tanglewood on Parade* with Seiji Ozawa conducting and over twelve thousand in attendance, a performance of Tom Oboe Lee's Concerto for Harp, which was composed for me and was conducted by Gunther Schuller, performances of the Handel Concerto and the Britten *Ceremony of Carols* in Haiti, master classes in China in 1979, and for the AHS Conference, a performance of the Ginastera Concerto with Arthur Fiedler in 1976, and an unrehearsed performance of the Harry Somers *Suite for Harp and Chamber Orchestra* in Winston Salem in 1987, unrehearsed because my flight was cancelled, and I didn't arrive until after the concert had begun.

I do find it difficult to find practice time to devote to my solo career, and therefore I try to keep my solo playing to a minimum, especially solo recitals which I find especially draining. The demands of a full time principal job with a major symphony are such that I feel fortunate to be able to find time to prepare a concerto or chamber music program, let alone an entire solo recital. However,



On tour with the BSO in Beijing, 1979

I would like to do more recordings. Although I did record the Debussy Trio in 1971 on the Deutsche Grammophon label with the Boston Symphony Chamber Players, and I have recorded quite a bit of contemporary chamber music, it was not until 1991 that I made a solo recording on the Boston Records label. In October of 1993, I flew to New Zealand to record the Norman Dello Joio Concerto with the New Zealand Symphony, and in November 1993 I went to London to record the Ginastera Concerto, the William Mathias Concerto, and the *Santa Fe Suite* for solo harp also by William Mathias. Both of these recordings will be on the Koch International label. I am also planning to do a recording of contemporary American flute and harp music with Leone Buyse.

Q. Based on your own experience, what advice would you give a young person who seeks to enter the profession today?

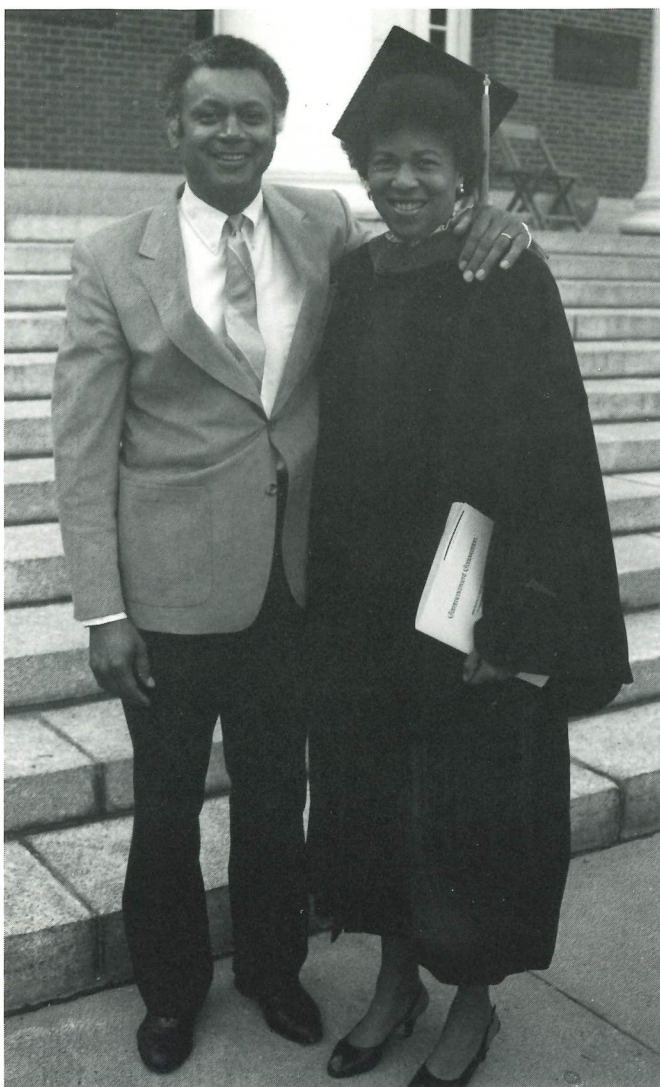
I would advise any young person entering the profession today to get the best teacher he or she possibly can. Assuming that the student has the dedication, drive, determination, and willingness to put in the long hours of practice necessary, a good teacher with the right contacts can advance the career. In addition, I advise always to maintain personal integrity. The respect that you gain from your colleagues, peers, and everyone that you encounter can further your career more than you realize. The audition process today is such that if you can jump through all of the hoops necessary to become a finalist, often it is the person with the best reputation who gets the job.

In 1992 I had the responsibility of arbitrating a very controversial hearing for the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra. I was chosen as the arbitrator because of my reputation. It was without a doubt the most difficult decision-making process I've ever gone through. I knew when I accepted the responsibility, however, that I could only be as fair and equitable as possible in the decision I rendered. I was committed to being fair in this process because of the discrimination I was subjected to in the past, based on the color of my skin.

Young people today should recognize that if they maintain their dignity and honesty, they will be better off—even though music is such a competitive field.

Q. Would you be willing to tell us something of your family life, and whether or not you have found meshing family life and career difficult?

August of 1980 was a very momentous month of my life. I not only became principal harpist of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, but more importantly, I became Mrs. Prentice Pilot. This union has truly fulfilled my life in every possible way. I have never found meshing family life and my career difficult because my husband is a very understanding and loving human being, and since he too is connected with the Pops, he understands the problems of being married to a symphony musician. Prentice is a music teacher in the Boston public schools and plays string bass with the Boston Pops Esplanade Orchestra. We have invested in a home on the Caribbean island of St. Maarten and have begun a concert series there. Nine-



1988: Ann Hobson Pilot, with her husband, Prentice Pilot, as she received an honorary Doctor of Music Degree from Bridgewater State College

teen ninety-three (1993) saw our sixth annual concert of chamber music and jazz on the island, and we have been able to donate a considerable amount of money each year to a charity, the past two years being one for handicapped children. We also support various minority-based charities in the Boston area. It is very rewarding for us to work together on these joint ventures. I also have a lovely stepdaughter who is a Doctor of Naprapathy in Chicago, and a wonderful stepson, who is living with us while he attends the University of Massachusetts-Boston.

Q. What role do you think harpists' organizations can and should play in the development of the profes-



Ann and Prentice Pilot with their instruments

sion? I note that you will be performing at the AHS National Conference in Boston this June.

I support the AHS because I think it is important that professional organizations exist to exchange ideas, knowledge, and role models, as well as to nurture young talent and encourage composers to write for the instrument. I think it is important that we know and support one another regardless of our differences in gender, race, religion, backgrounds, teachers, or method of training. We are together because of our love for and support of the harp and to increase the potential of the harp as a musical instrument.

Q. Are there any thoughts you would like to add as we bring this most pleasant interview to an end?

As I write the answers to these questions, I have been reflecting on my life and career and realize how fortunate I have been. Nobody attains such success alone, however, and I would like to thank everyone who has helped me along the way, especially my mother, Grace Hobson Smith, my primary teacher, Alice Chalifoux, and again my husband for his love and support as we enjoy our lives and careers together.

