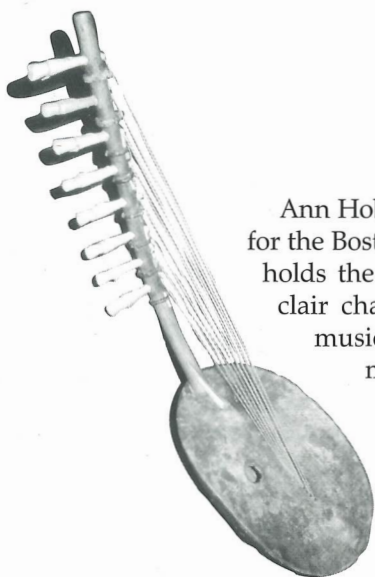


## Profile of Ann Hobson Pilot: An Uncommon Journey

by Frederick A. Lucies, Associate Editor



Ann Hobson Pilot, Principal Harp for the Boston Symphony Orchestra, holds the Willona Henderson Sinclair chair. Ann began studying music at age six with her mother, a former concert pianist and a teacher in the Philadelphia school system. She began harp studies in her teens with Mary Ann Castaldo, and continued training at the

Philadelphia Musical Academy with Marilyn Costello. In 1962, Ann spent the first of many summers in Camden, Maine, studying with Alice Chalifoux at the Salzedo Harp Colony. Ms. Chalifoux became a major influence on Ann, so she transferred to the Cleveland Institute of Music to continue studies with her. Ann graduated from the Institute with a Bachelor of Music degree in 1966. Her first professional appointment came in the 1965–1966 season when the Pittsburgh Symphony employed her as substitute second harpist. In the autumn of 1966, Ann became Principal Harp for the National Symphony in Washington, DC. She remained in Washington until 1969 when she joined the Boston Symphony. She became Principal for the BSO in 1980.

A fascinating event that initially occasioned this interview and profile was a trip Ann took as a part of her sabbatical during the 1996–1997 season. In February of 1997, Ann traveled with her husband, Prentice, to South Africa. There, she performed as a soloist with the

National Symphony of Johannesburg, a performance that would have been inconceivable in the days of apartheid. After the Johannesburg concert, Ann and Prentice traveled into the bush of Namibia to explore the roots of the harp in Africa. The trip involved a collaborative effort with WGBH Public Television and a number of grants funneled through the Museum of African-American History. While the original intent of the trip was on a much grander scale, funding fell short. However, the outcome, while not a complete reflection of the aboriginal dream, did become a PBS video production: *Ann Hobson Pilot: A Musical Journey*. It has already aired on U.S. Public Television stations, and additional funding will be sought to enable additional broadcasts.

While the trip and the video prompted my contact with Ann, the interview extended to the winding pathways of another aspect of Ann's "Uncommon Journey." I think you will find, with me, that the story is also an invitation to introspection, and a challenge to action.

### *Excerpts from the Interview:*

FAL: Perhaps you could talk a little bit about how the idea for your trip arose, how the grant originated . . . and what your goals were for this journey.

AHP: First the idea came for me to take a sabbatical from the symphony. After roughly 26–27 years with the BSO, I'd never really had a sabbatical. I'd been working and studying actually for 30 years, because I was with the Washington National Symphony as Principal Harp before I came to Boston. So when I applied for a sabbatical, I was just about at the top of the list—no one else



*Ann Hobson Pilot with the bushmen and bushwomen under the giant baobab tree. The instrument (also pictured above) is called an oaci.*





*Ann Hobson Pilot with the elephants in Broderstrom*

had been there longer and not been away. When it was granted to me, I didn't want to just sit and do nothing for the year. My husband, Prentice, and I had always wanted to go to Africa, so we started mulling over ideas about how we could make the trip more interesting. I was chatting one day with some people from the Museum of African-American History; this particular woman said that her studies have shown that the harp originated in Africa. So, I approached the Director of the Museum of Afro-American History and said I was very interested in doing a study about the African origins of the harp. She was excited about the idea as well, so together we approached people from WGBH (Boston's Public Television/Radio Stations). They were interested in doing a video about it, so it developed over the months into a project.

Then came the difficult part—raising funds for the trip. I had no idea how difficult fund raising was. But some people expressed an interest, and we got some seed money from Polaroid. The original plan was quite grand; we were going to start in Northern Africa, go into Egypt, study the tradition of the lyre, then go into Ethiopia, and then down into Kenya and into South Africa, and then over into the western part of Africa, to study the tradition of the Kora and all that—and Senegal.

But when sufficient funds were not forthcoming, the trip was narrowed down to include just what we did—which ended up being basically South Africa, Namibia, and Zimbabwe. I guess you could say it was a combination of grants and contributions; there were also some gifts from private foundations. The Museum was actually the sponsoring organization, so the funds were channeled through them. WGBH contributed a great deal also in terms of in-kind contributions.

FAL: So it was kind of a mixture of energies and efforts. How long did it take to get everything together?

AHP: Well, my sabbatical extended from September of 1996 through May of 1997. In the summer of '96, I thought that the project was dead because we hadn't raised sufficient funds. WGBH had estimated a budget

of around \$300,000, and we hadn't even come close to raising that much. Meanwhile, Suzie Dangle, an independent producer who does the *Evening at Pops* broadcasts at WGBH, came out to Tanglewood with a film crew of two guys, Larry Lecain and Bob McCausland, to film me for another spot about the harp which was going to be used for a series about BSO musicians. While they were there, I mentioned this project and what I wanted to do . . . and that it seemed that wasn't going to work out. They said: "Now, wait a minute. . . . *We'd* like to go to Africa. . . ." So, that's exactly what happened. Larry went as the cameraman, Bob as the soundman, and Suzie was the producer. She did it pro bono—she didn't accept any fees, and the guys gave a reduced rate. That's how it was able to happen.

So, this whole thing, the entire trip, and I think the concert itself is really amazing . . . had just one cameraman. . . . All of the angles . . . I don't know how he did it . . . were done by one cameraman. There were two concerts in Johannesburg . . . their subscription series are on Wednesday and Thursday nights—so he had two opportunities to get shots. Of course, there was an audience there both nights—so he couldn't really move around all that much. So all the shots were stationary—from one spot on one evening and another on the second evening. And of course there were close-up shots. When I came in Thursday morning, after the night of the first concert, he hooked me up with a microphone; they played back what I had played the night before—and I actually played along with what I heard. So some of the close-up shots are of me playing by myself—that's how they were able to get the variety of shots.

FAL: What was the actual duration of the trip? Did you have a set of specific goals and expectations for the trip?

AHP: The actual trip that Prentice and I took was close to five weeks. But the part of the trip that the film crew went was about 12 days.

[Our goals and expectations were] just exactly what happened: to film the concert, to film the master class, and to go out into the bush to film the bushmen playing their indigenous harps. The original plan was a lot more ambitious and a lot more adventurous in terms of exploring the use of the harp—but we lacked the financing for that. WGBH ended up showing more of the story of my life instead of searching for the origins of the harp. We just didn't come back with a lot of footage about that.

Some months before the trip, we had gone out to California to speak with Dr. Sue Carole Devale. She is an ethno-musicologist who specializes in the harp. She appears at many of the meetings of the Historical Harp Society. Her research indicates that the harp originated in Uganda and traveled up the Nile. We very much wanted to go to Uganda—to follow the path—but it just didn't work out. So, the video ended up being more of a personal story rather than an historical piece.

FAL: So specific research results were not one of the fruits of this trip?



AHP: No. As you know, a general concept that many people have is that the harp originated from the bow and arrow. You see in the film a man playing the musical bow. As Dr. Sue Carole Devale points out, a lot of this you cannot prove. Some people say that the harp originated in Mesopotamia, now Iraq, because there are artifacts from there. However, those of Dr. Devale's ilk say that they really think that the harp originated in black Africa, and the reason that no artifacts are extant is that they did not use preservatives. In Mesopotamia, they had access to substances that preserved the wood.

Nevertheless, the whole trip was very worthwhile and extremely enjoyable. THE highlight of the trip for both of us was going into the bush—to the Kalahari—to the bushmen. It was an incredible experience—just being in Africa—with the stars at night . . . and meeting the indigenous bushmen—the people that speak with the clicks.

Another aspect of the trip that was just awesome was just seeing the animals. We took a trip to a game farm. The people who owned it took us out in this big van. It was just Prentice and myself, the film crew and the women who owned the farm. We were driving along, and all of a sudden the zebras appeared, and then giraffes. They would come right up to the van. It was just incredible—we went a little further and there were some elephants—and a hippopotamus—just all under this open expanse of sky, and—it was just amazing. . . .

FAL: You spoke at the Boston Chapter Meeting about your experience in actually making the video. I assume that this was the first time you've made a video of which you yourself have actually been the central topic. What was it like?

AHP: Well, someone at the meeting said: "I just can't imagine playing with a video camera." You know, playing at the concert, and being followed around by a cameraman. I made the joke that I felt like a movie star (laughter) and at times it did. I have to admit, it was rather fun.

I am accustomed to being filmed—sometimes with the camera right there, focused on my hands—in both



Ann and Prentice in Broderstrom outside of Johannesburg

BSO and Pops broadcasts. However, with the concert in Johannesburg, there was extra pressure because I knew there was not going to be any way to splice. I had only one shot at it for the video because they used the sound track from the second night—the only one when they could tap into the sound system of the hall, because the concert was broadcast.

FAL: And the piece? Please tell me a little bit about the piece.

AHP: The piece, *Ennanga*, is by the Afro-American composer, William Grant Still. It was composed, I believe, in the '50s—around 1956, and it was premiered by Lois Adele Craft, who was a friend of Still's. She was a west-coast harpist who is no longer living. She was from Hollywood, California.

Someone told me about the piece back in 1980 or so. They had heard a recording of it and found out that Lois Adele Craft was the harpist. So I found out how to get in touch with her. I wrote to her and said that I had heard about this piece and that I was very interested in getting a copy of the music. At the time, it was not published.

I believe that she talked to William Grant Still's daughter and arranged to have the music sent to me. Lois Adele Craft had made the first recording of it, and, of course, it was out of print. So, I made the next recording (and so far as I know, the only other recording that there is) in about '83 or '84. It is on New World Records with an ensemble called "Videmus."

That's an Ennanga over there (points across the room to a small stringed instrument).

FAL: Is that actually tuned?

AHP: I don't keep it in tune—but it can be tuned. My cousin, who is Assistant Curator for the zoo in Washington, DC, makes periodic trips to Uganda. When I told her about this project, and that I was playing this piece *Ennanga*, she brought one back to me.

FAL: Are these being made and played today?

AHP: Oh, yes. They are being played all over Uganda today for entertainment purposes, and I would guess for ritual purposes as well.

FAL: Do you know of any ways that they are used in worship?

AHP: Well, you know the harp is considered a very spiritual instrument in Africa—so a lot of times they used them for rituals—I'm not exactly sure about the *Ennanga per se*. There is a man who is the greatest *Ennanga* player in Uganda; I was in touch with him, a Dr. Albert Zembeke. He has made recordings. We contacted each other and I was hoping that he would come to America to play the *Ennanga* while the video was being filmed. Once again, that would have been fantastic, but we lacked the funds to accomplish it.

FAL: So it's clear that the Saga is not over!

AHP: Hopefully. . . . (laughter)





FAL: One of the things I ponder a lot, because of my own interests in music and spirituality, is that many scholars believe that the harp was used for healing purposes. Was there any of that coming up on your trip?

AHP: Not that we saw directly, but I'm sure it happens.

FAL: While I've not heard the piece by William Grant Still that you played, all of his music that I have heard I remember as being incredibly mystical. Does this piece have a mystical quality?

AHP: I think so—especially the second movement. The piece is supposed to be based on African folk melodies, but, to me, the second movement sounds so much like some Negro Spirituals that I've heard. . . . One that I always think of when I hear it is "Wade in the Water" (that and one other piece) yes, it really sounds like that. The last movement and the first movement sound very African, while the middle movement sounds African-American.

FAL: Have you performed this piece here in Boston with the symphony?

AHP: Well, no, I've never performed it with the BSO, but as a matter of fact, I performed it at the AHS Conference in Boston which was in '94—except that I performed it with a chamber group. I did a chamber music concert then. I think it was '94.

FAL: I don't know if this is "overly grand" a question, but it comes from the fact that I have heard some harpists refer to you as the "Grande Dame" of the harp world. What would you hope would be your legacy for harpists individually and for the harp world? What's the one thing that you would like to accomplish for the world in terms of the harp?

AHP: Well, that's a difficult question. Let's see, how do I say this? I always feel like there are little pockets of harpists. There's a little pocket of Salzedo harpists, and a pocket of Grandjany harpists, French harpists. I would like to see the harp be more inclusive—more universal—

everybody together, you know . . . so it's not Salzedo versus this or that. . . .

FAL: Do you feel that the schools tend to divide people?

Ann: Yes. That might be changing, but in the old days, that definitely was the way it was. I really believe that each method has its own validity; certain methods work better for some people and others better for others. You shouldn't really be "against" someone because they don't play the same school that you do. Any more than you should be against someone because they are not the same race or religion or any of that. . . .

FAL: If you were allowed to write one sentence of advice to a beginning harpist, whether they were eight or eighty, what would it be?

AHP: That's tough. Other than the usual "Practice"? My husband's expression is probably perfect in this case—which is: "Practice makes permanent." You can practice incorrectly—and if you don't have a good idea of what you are doing, you can ingrain the wrong position and the wrong technique into your head and into your hands. So it's important to get good guidance from the outset, so that you really know what you are practicing for—so that you are reinforcing good technique as opposed to getting sloppy habits.

FAL: Practice makes permanent. I like that. As my Hungarian piano teacher would say: "If you practice your mistakes, you get better and better at making them."

Were there any particular challenges that you faced along your own path? Have you any reflections to share on challenges that you faced as you were developing as a musician?

AHP: Well, I think, as the video points out, the biggest challenge I faced, of course, was the racial one. Back when I was coming along (I started the harp in, say, 1959) there were no black role models as far as the harp was concerned. And I had difficulty at the time getting into some schools because blacks were not "encouraged." So that was the biggest hurdle that I had to jump across.



And, of course, I remember Edna Phillips, former principal harpist of the Philadelphia Orchestra—my origins. She was like a mentor to me, always was. One time, in fact I was very young, about seventeen, and I had already decided that I was going to pursue the harp, she said to me, "You know, you are going to have to be twice as good as everybody else."

I remember thinking at that time, "I wonder what she means." I just didn't understand. Then some time, the next day or that evening, I suddenly understood what she meant. As a young person, I just thought, "Well, yes, I think I want to learn to play the harp." I thought of her words many, many times. It could have been taken as a discouraging comment, where a person could have said, "Well, if I have to be twice as good, then I'll just quit; that's too much of a challenge." However, she meant it in a motivational way—to get me to work harder—and I think that is just how I took it when I finally figured out what she meant—because of the racial prejudice that I was going to encounter along the way. This was especially true when it came to getting jobs. And ironically enough, I was, in fact, discriminated against quite a bit when I was a student.

There were a lot of times when I wasn't able to play here and there, but once I got to the professional level—perhaps because it was in the '60s by that point—I never had any trouble getting a big job. I only had trouble getting the small jobs: which is strange. For example, I wasn't allowed to play in a department store in the harp ensemble, because they didn't want any blacks . . . that kind of thing. I wasn't able to play a number of small jobs in places because they just didn't want any blacks.

FAL: Were these harsh and offensive situations?

AHP: Oh, sure: absolutely. But I easily got in with the Washington National audition. Actually, I was put into that job because of Sylvia Meyer. She was very big in AHS activities; she injured her finger. The orchestra called Alice Chalifoux, and I was at Marlboro at the time with Rudolf Serkin—and everybody recommended me. So I went into the job and signed a contract for one year. And after that year, when she decided not to return, I was offered a full time contract. I was there for three years, and then I auditioned for the BSO job—and got that. So I can't say that I've had any problems in terms of getting the big jobs—just the small jobs. So that's great—that's the most important.

FAL: It's very interesting to me. In my own experience, going through high school and college, and then on to theological school, I was very deeply involved in the Civil Rights Movement. However, my own reflection is that, in many ways, although you now have some legal support, I'm not really sure that the inner feelings of people have changed much. Do you have any experience of that now as a musician?

AHP: I think that, because the laws have changed, people tend to be less overt with their discrimination—their hostility and anger—because there are laws there now

to protect the individual that were not there before. So there is still a lot of bigotry.

I think it still exists a great deal; but for someone like me, in classical music which is this predominantly white establishment, it's more hidden. I can go to work without worrying. For example, I know that when we go on tour, I can stay in any hotel with the other BSO players, whereas, when I first joined, that was not the case. As the only black person in the National Symphony, they had to get special permission for me to stay in certain hotels. And when we would go by bus to certain places, there were plenty of signs that said "White Only"—some of my colleagues would have to take me down the street. Well, that doesn't happen any more—which is good. If someone doesn't like me because I'm black, as long as they don't let me know that, that's fine . . . That's their problem, not mine. But when they put that on me, then it becomes my problem.

FAL: I can only imagine the sort of struggle that that engenders in anyone—I mean, each of us has his or her own struggles with some part of our identity—it's really beyond comprehension. I really wanted to ask whether racial issues had a direct or indirect effect on your career but you just spoke very eloquently about it.



*Ann Hobson Pilot giving a harp demonstration at the Martin Luther King School in Boston*



Ann Hobson Pilot coaches a chamber music class while Seiji Ozawa looks on.



AHP: There was no way that they couldn't in the time that I came along. I remember one of the most hurtful times of all. I had been at the Philadelphia Music Academy just post-high school, for a little over two and a half years, when I decided to transfer out to Cleveland to study with Alice [Chalifoux]. And the students of the Institute at that time stayed in Western Reserve dorms. I was entering the dorm for the first time because I had stayed at home when I was in Philly. It was January. I was definitely the new kid on the block, so to speak. I went to my room and met my roommate. My folks had driven me up, so we went out to dinner. When we returned from dinner, my roommate had moved out of the room. It was only a matter of two hours when we went out to eat and when I came back she had moved out. All her stuff was gone. I said "Well, what's wrong with me." She was a musician, too, a pianist. I couldn't figure out what had happened; I found out the next day that it had been spread all over the school, because she had gone back to the house mother at the time and said that she refused to live in the same room with a black student; she refused to go back to the room—and of course it just spread and so everybody knew about it. It was not only the embarrassment and humiliation of having your roommate move out on you after a ten-minute meeting, but then the fact that everybody knew—that I will never forget.

There were others at the school who wanted nothing to do with me. At the time, there were not that many black students at the Institute: a couple of singers, a clarinetist, and me. Some people were very snobbish and hostile toward me. And after I got the BSO job, I got some letters from these same folks. I did not get one from the roommate who moved out, but I got some letters from some of these folks, trying to be my friends.


FAL: Would you tell me about your harp, that lovely gold Style 23?

AHP: That's a very old harp—the number is 1643. It was built around 1916. And I found it—it belonged to a stu-

dent at NEC—a flutist. It was in her grandmother's home. And her grandmother died—she had left it in the attic. It was a basket case: it had five strings on it; there was a big hole in the sounding board and all, and she was trying to sell it. So I bought it, and shipped it to Lyon & Healy and asked them to rebuild it. I never knew what it was going to come out like. It's a very, very wide-spaced harp. . . . But it's great.

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A few days after our interview, after thinking a bit more about my question about what Ann wanted her legacy to be, she sent me these words in an e-mail: "I had another thought about your question about what I hope my legacy will be to the harp world. I hope that I will have been a role model to bring about more diversity in the harp world. When I first began the study of the harp, the instrument was considered to be a feminine, Eurocentric instrument. I hope that my presence in the harp world will inspire more people of color to become involved with the harp and that it will be known as an instrument for both sexes and all people."

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