



A Brief History of the Principal Harpists of the Boston Symphony Orchestra

by Cynthia Price-Glynn

Author's note: In March 2009 a new panel was hung off the entrance hallway of Symphony Hall in Boston, Massachusetts, illustrating the history of the Boston Symphony harpists from the orchestra's founding in 1881 through today. As space for text and photos on the panel was limited, I chose to concentrate on the careers of the five people who have so far been principal harpists with the BSO: Alexander Freygang, Heinrich Schuëcker, Alfred Holy, Bernard Zighéra, and Ann Hobson Pilot. Thanks to Ina Zdorovetchi and BSO Archivist Bridget Carr for their great help.

IN the late 1800s, classical music concerts in Boston were plentiful and vibrant, as well as well-attended by area audiences. There were fine local orchestras who had regular seasons of several concerts a year, and many established orchestras included Boston in their tours. But in 1881, Henry Lee Higginson, the forty-seven-year-old partner in his family's brokerage and banking business, wanted Boston to be equal in culture to European cities and a rival to other American cities like New York City, Chicago, Pittsburgh, and Philadelphia. To this end, he founded and funded the Boston Symphony Orchestra, and continued to support it for thirty-five years. Finally, by 1916, the orchestra had become self-sufficient and even profitable.

Higginson wanted his orchestra to be a permanent and regular presence in Boston. The musicians he hired had to agree to a strict and demanding work schedule and to play for no other conductor or musical association (a rule that was eventually relaxed). Higginson soon evicted the initial Boston musicians and imported male musicians from Europe, luring

them with attractive salaries and the excitement of being in America.

From the beginning, like other 'permanent and regular' orchestras, the BSO toured extensively, playing regularly in Portland, Providence, Hartford, New Haven, New York, Brooklyn, Baltimore, Philadelphia, Washington DC, as well as in the local Massachusetts towns of Cambridge, Northampton, Fall River, and Salem.

The early BSO concert programs were usually a mixture of chamber music, a symphony, and a solo piece, often played by the orchestra's harpist. According to the records, those pieces were compositions by contemporary composers of the day: Albert Zabel, Elias Parish Alvars, Alfred Holy, and Marcel Tournier. The harpists employed by the BSO were titled "Solo Harpist."

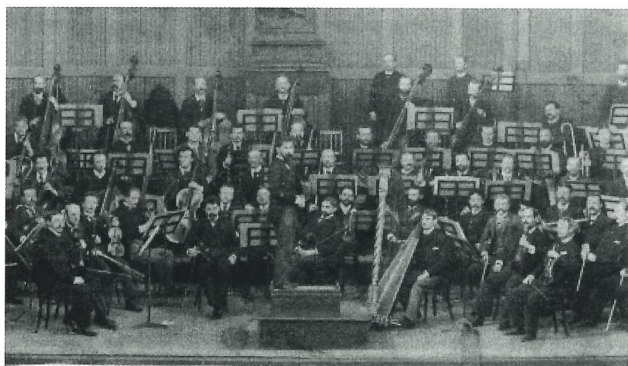
The first harpist contracted by the BSO was Alexander Freygang, about whom we know practically nothing. He worked for the BSO for five years, from its beginning in 1881 through 1886. After that his name appears on the roster of the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra in New York City. Freygang began the tradition for all the BSO Solo Harpists to play Mozart's Concerto for Flute and Harp with the orchestra.

Reviews of the Mozart performances by the first three BSO Harpists in 1884, 1886, and 1913 appeared in the Boston newspapers. All of the reviews praise the admirable artistry, faultless technique, and brilliant virtuosity of the harpists and flutists. But the concerto is always referred to as "a novelty piece," "full of dainty beauties and charm, the pleasures of which quickly fade." "It is pretty salon music but not effective or appreciable in a large concert hall. And

whereas the flute part is always interesting . . . the harp part is monotonous and even tiresome.”

For unknown reasons Freygang left the Boston Symphony in 1886, and a new Solo Harpist was needed. At that time the orchestra conductors were often the primary agents who sought, auditioned, and hired the musicians for their orchestras. The BSO conductor in 1886 was Wilhelm Gericke, who is said to have earned the orchestra its national reputation. Gericke recruited and engaged for the BSO a nineteen-year-old harpist from the Vienna Music Academy who had played in a Hamburg orchestra for one year.

The harpist was Heinrich Schuëcker who stayed with the BSO for the next twenty-seven years. All of the BSO harpists have augmented their music activities and supplemented their incomes in Boston outside the orchestra. For example, during his tenure, Schuëcker taught harp, bought and sold harps, played church organ in duets with a violinist every Sunday, performed with other Boston music groups, and gave private concerts either solo, with his harp-violin-cello trio, or with his harpist brother Edmund Schuëcker, who is remembered for his compositions and method books, and for playing with the Metropolitan Opera in New York and with orchestras in Chicago, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, and Covent Garden.



The Boston Symphony Orchestra

Heinrich Schuëcker with the BSO in 1891
Photograph courtesy of the Boston Symphony Archives.

In April 1913, Heinrich Schuëcker, then forty-six, became ill while playing a Cecelia Society choral concert in Symphony Hall. He went home in a carriage, and died suddenly of a heart attack. The en-

suing eulogies from the press, his colleagues and audiences praised his artistry, his virtuosity as a soloist and as an ensemble player, as well as his tone.

The timing of Schuëcker's death was problematic for the BSO because the day after his death the orchestra had scheduled a series of concerts that required harp. At that time, the BSO was not a Musicians Union Orchestra (and did not become one for another twenty-nine years). Alas, it seems that all the capable harpists in Boston belonged to the Musicians Union, and thus the BSO could not hire them. So a BSO cellist was enlisted to play the harp part for Mahler's Fifth Symphony on the piano, and the harp part for Berlioz's three pieces from *The Damnation of Faust* on the celesta.

In addition, the programming for the next series of concerts commemorating the hundredth anniversary of the birth of Richard Wagner had to be changed. The orchestra turned to Wagner works without harp, filling out the program with a Brahms symphony.

All this caused huge outcries and criticism from the Boston newspapers and concert-goers: a brouhaha that led to the subsequent contracting of two BSO harpists. But that gets ahead of our chronological history.

In 1913, after the death of Heinrich Schuëcker, the management of the BSO received over 200 applications for the principal harp position, from as far west as San Francisco, and as far east as Bucharest, Rome, and St. Petersburg. The BSO conductor at the time was Karl Muck, who was also conducting orchestras in Berlin and Vienna where he had long worked with Alfred Holy. When Holy expressed an interest in the Boston job, Dr. Muck immediately set out to secure him for the BSO Solo Harpist position.

Who was Alfred Holy? After studying at the Vienna Conservatory, harpist Holy had earned Muck's accolade in a 1913 Boston newspaper as "the foremost harpist of Europe." As a soloist he introduced the pedal harp to concert audiences throughout East, West, and Central Europe. He also played for private soirees, ladies nights at the lodge, and other special events. He even had a comedy show on the art of parody. He wrote that "these musical jokes helped me earn the largest artists fees I ever received."



Alfred Holy with second harpist Cella
 Photograph courtesy of the Boston Symphony Archives

Holy's rise to prominence as an orchestra harpist began shortly after his graduation when, during his military service for Czechoslovakia, he became the principal harpist with the Royal German Theater in Prague where Karl Muck used him in an emergency for a Wagner opera he was conducting in that city. Muck was so impressed with Holy that he took him to the Royal Opera House in Berlin where Holy shared the harp position with Poenitz and Posse. During this time, for six seasons, Holy was also one of the harpists at the annual summer Bayreuth Festival.

In 1903, after many years of trying to lure Holy there, Gustav Mahler, the Artistic Director of the Imperial Opera in Vienna, brought Alfred Holy to Vienna. Since conductors were actually competing for his services, Holy was able to negotiate an unprecedented ten year contract which included pay increases and a pension of one third of his salary plus money for harp strings. As a result, Holy became the highest paid harpist in Europe and one of the highest paid orchestral musicians in the world.

The contemporary composers whose music Holy played and with whom he often worked included

Mahler, Reznicek, Puccini, Richard Strauss, Johann Strauss, Enesco, Mascagni, and Saint-Saëns. In addition, he himself was well known as a prolific composer of music for harp solo, harp duo, harp, organ and violin, as well as for transcriptions and studies.

Holy's ten-year contract in Vienna ended in 1913. Holy was forty-seven and tired of playing opera. He was attracted to the BSO position by the prospect of solo concertizing. After signing the BSO contract, Holy and his wife, neither of whom spoke English, came to Boston, waiting until they felt settled to bring their sons to Boston.

Holy's first concert with the BSO featured the Mozart Concerto for Flute and Harp. In addition to his orchestral responsibilities, Holy played in a cello-violin-harp trio with violinist Arthur Fiedler. Throughout his tenure, Holy played harp solos on the BSO and Boston Pops concerts after which he was invariably called upon to play several encores.

Holy was the first BSO harpist to use the American-made Lyon & Healy harp, a brand the orchestra still uses. Compared to the European Erard harps, the Lyon & Healys had a structure that was stronger and sturdier, and mechanisms that were more precise and durable. These developments enabled the harpists to produce a louder sound and to have more reliable intonation: two attributes important in orchestral work.

After fifteen years with the BSO, Holy, then in his sixties, felt a younger harpist should assume the orchestra job. He also yearned to return to his homeland, especially since military service in WW I had prevented his sons from joining their parents in America.

Alfred Holy left the BSO amid grand and appreciative farewells from colleagues, the press, and concert goers. He had several happy years of retirement in Vienna, but eventually suffered through WW II and the Nazi occupation that robbed, looted, and cheated him out of everything he had. In 1948, tragically, at eighty-two, he died from a lethal combination of tuberculosis and starvation.

Before telling about the harpist who followed Alfred Holy let us return to the outcries thirteen years earlier, in 1913, when the BSO had to use piano and celesta in place of harp in a program of Mahler and

Berlioz because the BSO's one and only harpist had died.

At the time, music critics in the Boston newspapers wrote statements like the following: "The world over, two harps have been as generally and firmly the rule with orchestras of the first rank as the 'usual' string sections, wind choir, [and brass groupings]. . . . The reasons are obvious: more and more contemporary composers include two harps in their scores; it is sometimes advantageous to double harp parts to strengthen the tone projection of the instruments; and to assure that a capable harpist is available if one of them is unable to perform. . . ." "This necessity of two harpists for any respectable orchestra, which the BSO aspires to be, has long been suggested and urged by the Boston press and by the intelligent and influential frequenters of the BSO concerts." "It has been noted that the orchestra management has never hesitated to indulge in expenditures for artistic necessities, and that for thirty years the obstinate neglect of hiring two harpists has been its only mark of economy. . . . However, the crisis in which the only BSO harpist died and was irreplaceable has finally touched the pride and prestige of the management to end this queer distinction and irrationality for only one harp and employ two harpists for the next season."

It should be noted that for another twenty-nine years the BSO maintained another obstinate and queer distinction: that of being the only USA orchestra not to join the Musicians Union—until 1942.

Alfred Holy became the BSO principal harpist in 1913, and he was joined by a succession of second harpists. The first concert with this new arrangement included Strauss's *Death and Transfiguration* and Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*. It was noted that there were 100 men and ONE WOMAN on stage. Since then, most of the second harpists have been women: a phenomenon that provided the initial gender-integration of the BSO. Many second harpists stayed only one season, others for four or five, another for eighteen, and another for eleven years. Most of them were students of the BSO principal harpists.

With this new arrangement in place, we return to 1926 and Alfred Holy's decision to retire. The BSO

conductor in 1926 was Serge Koussevitzky. When he began searching for a new principal harpist, American harpist Lucile Johnson Rosenbloom drew his attention to an excellent harpist/pianist at the Paris Conservatory named Bernard Zighéra. Zighéra was then harpist with the Société des Concerts, the Paris Opera, as well as the pianist with a hotel tango band.



Bernard Zighéra
Photograph courtesy of the Boston Symphony Archives

After hearing Zighéra play both harp and piano, Koussevitzky offered him a three-year contract to be the second harpist and the pianist with the BSO. And so twenty-two-year-old Zighéra, who spoke no English and whose cellist brother was already in the BSO, moved to Boston. Now that Alfred Holy had a successor, he stayed on two more years and retired in 1928, at which time Koussevitzky elevated Zighéra to the principal harp position.

It seems that Zighéra did not play the Mozart Concerto for Flute and Harp, but he was often featured with the BSO in Ravel's *Introduction and Allegro* and Martin's *Petite Suite Concertante*. The first piano part Zighéra played with the BSO was Stravinsky's *Petrouchka*. In addition to his BSO duties, Zighéra organized and conducted the Zighéra Cham-

ber Orchestra in a successful six-year concert series that ended with the onset of WW II.

This charming, vivid, and witty man was a consultant to contemporary composers in two capacities: as a harpist, and as Koussevitzky's indispensable rehearsal pianist. Koussevitzky commissioned many orchestra scores that have since become cornerstones of the orchestral repertoire. Koussivetzky could not, however, hear a score in his head and so needed Zighéra to play the scores over and over on the piano, as he practiced his baton-technique until he was ready to stand in front of the orchestra. The commissioned works that Zighéra brought-to-life on the piano (and whose first harp parts he premiered) included Bartok's *Concerto for Orchestra*, Stravinsky's *Symphony of Psalms*, Prokofiev's *Symphony No. 4*, as well as works by Copland, Hanson, Hindemith, Respighi, Roussel, and premieres by Barber, Ravel, Berg, Milhaud, Piston, William Schumann, and Roger Sessions.

As time went by, many of the new scores required both harp and piano, so, in 1943, after seventeen years in this double role, Zighéra had to choose between the two instruments. He chose the harp and incidentally relinquished his rehearsal-pianist duties to Koussivetzky's new protégé, Leonard Bernstein. After fifty-four years with the BSO, Zighéra, at age seventy-six, retired from the Boston Symphony. He died four years later.

Meanwhile, eleven years earlier, in 1969, the BSO had engaged Ann Hobson Pilot as second harpist. Because of the orchestra's affiliation with the Musicians Union since 1942, the process for auditioning musicians had changed. As a result, those applicants for the second harp position in 1969 played behind a screen for a panel that included BSO conductor William Steinberg and Boston Pops conductor Arthur Fiedler. When Pilot won the audition, her new position included both second harpist with the Boston Symphony and principal harpist with the Boston Pops Orchestra. Like her predecessors, Pilot played chamber music in the BSO Chamber Players and with her own trio of flute, cello, and harp. When Zighéra retired in 1980, Pilot, like Zighéra before her, was elevated to the principal harp position by conductor Seiji Ozawa.



Ann Hobson Pilot

Photograph courtesy of the Boston Symphony Archives

Pilot renewed the tradition of playing the Mozart *Concerto for Flute and Harp* and continued playing the Ravel and Martin solos, adding harp solos to the BSO repertoire that included the Debussy *Dances*, the Ginastera *Harp Concerto*, and William Grant Still's *Ennanga*. In her honor, the BSO commissioned a new harp concerto by John Williams, *On Willows and Birches*, which she premiered in the fall of 2009.

Ann Hobson Pilot has initiated several "Firsts" with the BSO: She is the first woman to be principal harpist; the first principal harpist to have been trained in this country (she went to the Philadelphia Music Academy and the Cleveland Institute of Music); the first principal harpist to be born in this country; and the first African-American musician to occupy a principal position not only in the BSO but in any major orchestra.

Pilot retired from the Boston Symphony in August 2009, after forty years with the orchestra. The BSO has named the sixth in its line of principal harpists: Jessica Zhou. Zhou is the second woman to be principal harpist; the second principal harpist to be trained in this country (she went to Interlochen Arts Academy and to Juilliard); and the first to be born and educated in Beijing, China.

Zhou also auditioned initially behind a screen and eventually in front of the entire orchestra. She has earned many awards, many high placements in international harp competitions, performed many concertos and much chamber music, and played with many orchestras. She has been the principal harpist with the New York City Opera since 2001. Surely, during

the coming years Zhou will distinguish herself at the BSO, carrying on some traditions of her predecessors and carving out her own unique identity.

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