



“Friendships ... Around the World” – Part II

Interview with Susann McDonald

by Linda Wood Rollo



Susann McDonald

Susann McDonald, the renowned harpist, recording artist, and teacher, retired from her position as Artistic Director of the World Harp Congress (WHC) in 2011. The following interview discusses her many experiences and memories of her thirty-year tenure as Artistic Director.

Linda Wood Rollo: Could you describe the work that was entailed as being the Artistic Director?

Susann McDonald: In general, my responsibilities grew as the World Harp Congress (WHC) grew. However, when the WHC Board accepted my recommendation to have Congresses only every three years, rather than every other year, this helped. While I still worked closely with the host country Chairs and their committees, the work was spread out over a larger time frame. It also allowed time for new artists to rise in prominence.

The host country situation was always different. Some had larger committees than others; sometimes the host Chair did most of the work and made most of the decisions in direct consultation with me. I often served as a sounding board for their ideas, and I sought to encourage each country to put on the Congress they had dreamed about! Occasionally I had to remind them that we needed to “service” the entire world and not just their particular area of the world. I greatly enjoyed my relationships with these host Chairs, and many remain close personal friends. I am grateful to have worked with so many wonderful host committees and the host committee Chairs. We all forged strong friendships in spite of many stressful and difficult situations.

LR: What were some of the most difficult aspects of your job?

SM: There were always hard decisions and choices to be made. There were always time constraints, making it very difficult to fit in all the harpists who applied and who we wished to include. I can say there were always some disappointments.

It was also hard when some artists cancelled at the last moment. We always had a waiting list. It was sad when we as a committee had set a program around a certain artist and their repertoire, and also publicized their appearance, and then had to replace them and perhaps unbalance the program. So there were the issues of: late cancellations; programs that were changed without the Board or my approval; programs that exceeded the length that had been decided upon; halls that suddenly became unavailable; and lodging costs which went too high but it was too late to change hotels. Those are just to name a very few problems encountered. This was balanced by the great camaraderie and support from our membership and Board.

LR: I know you always wanted to support and include contemporary composers and their music in each Congress both through performances and composers panels. How did you go about this?

SM: At first we had special “New Music” concerts, during the day and in the evenings. At times, these programs were not as well attended as other concerts, yet we knew how important they were. Supporting composers of harp music has always been one of our goals. So a change was made rather recently, which has proved very successful, to have New Music compositions intermingled with traditional repertoire everywhere, resulting in more new works being heard on every concert and appreciated by a wider audience.

LR: To go back to your workload as Artistic Director, how has technology and the means of communication changed your work?

SM: Very much, of course! At first, our only communication was by letter (post) or, in emergency, by telephone and telex. Now, due to the Internet, communication is very rapid. Instead of meetings in person and many long distance telephone calls, most of our work is done by emails and faxes. However, there has always been a need to discuss many issues by telephone calls. Artists and Focus on Youth applicants send DVDs, and so along with personal recommendations of live performances, we use these to make our evaluations. The downside for me became the constant emails from all around the world that required so much time and energy that I was rarely free from my WHC work!

LR: Philosophically, what do you see as the impact of the WHC in the world?

SM: When I look at the World Harp Congresses over these many years, it is hard to believe what a profound influence they have had in the world today. Especially noteworthy is the fact the harp has achieved such a place of prominence in the world. I know, for me personally, seeing harp soloists in front of major orchestras, sometimes four or more at a time, has been a special thrill. And to see literally hundreds of harpists perform in major international venues and return to their home countries with credentials that give them prominence and influence there, this too has made me proud of the WHC and the support it has provided.

When I look at the photos of the past eleven Congresses and see the names of those FOY performers, who are now major teachers and artists, I am really amazed at the lives who have been influenced by that opportunity so many had many years ago!

LR: What do you see as the future of the WHC?

SM: I believe the WHC will continue to have an important role in the harp world. I have always felt it served as a sort of an “umbrella” organization, uniting the different schools of harp playing, encouraging both youths and professionals, providing a venue for composers, publishers, exhibitors,



manufacturers, and attracting more and more people to come to know and appreciate the instrument itself. We have created audiences for the harp around the world. We have had a major influence in uniting the diversities in the harp world and fostering understanding, friendship and mutual respect. These are lasting values and goals of the WHC, which I believe will endure.

The WHC always has had a need for financial support. The Board of Directors must give “seed” money to each country to announce the Congress, prepare printing and advertising, before any funds come in to support the event. I wish every harpist would consider giving even a small amount each year to the WHC! It could also make a huge difference if harpists would consider supporting the WHC Phia Berghout Endowment Fund to ensure our future.

I am so happy to have “passed the torch” of the artistic direction to my former student and dear colleague, the very capable Isabelle Perrin, and to Karen Vaughan, her associate, who will help her in this big job! I know that in their fine

hands the future of the artistic direction of the WHC will go forward to new heights. And it is always wonderful to see the willingness and enthusiasm of young colleagues who are stepping up into positions of importance and the hard work required to fulfill the goals of the WHC.

LR: Were there special people in the WHC who inspired and supported you?

SM: Yes, of course. Phia Berghout was a great inspiration, mentor and role model and there were my dear friends, Deane Sherman, Ann Stockton, and Vera Dulova, all of whom I miss greatly. And you, Linda, who were so supportive and who dedicated so many years of your life to starting “from scratch” the *WHC Newsletter*, later to become the *WHC Review*, plus developing the WHC Correspondents from each country. This served as the “glue” that kept us all in touch between Congresses and brought our world closer together. Your contribution was enormous, at great personal sacrifice of time and energy. Your service to the WHC has been incalculable! Also, Pat Wooster, whom Ann Stockton chose

to succeed her, has served with tremendous dedication and strength of leadership these past many years and produced one of our finest Congresses in Tacoma. Ann Yeung has been such a wonderful editor to whom you “passed the torch!”

LR: What was the importance of the Board of Directors in relation to your work and to your love of the WHC?

SM: One of my greatest joys has been working with the WHC Board of Directors. While Board members are elected for terms and change every few years, we have always enjoyed a wonderful relationship. They have all been dear friends and valued colleagues who sacrificed their time and also paid their own expenses to attend our meetings around the globe! In addition, their creative suggestions as to repertoire and artists, new music and every detail of each Congress cannot be under-estimated. In many cases, their outstanding performances as harpists have greatly added to the prestige of the WHC. They have served as the heart and soul of the World Harp Congress with very little recognition.

LR: Finally, what has made your years of dedicated work to the WHC worthwhile?

SM: Without a doubt, the loving friendships I cherish throughout the world because of the WHC!! It would take pages to list their names, all of whom are very dear to me and with whom I share so many wonderful memories. You know who you are, and I thank you all for your love and support these many years.

Retrospective WHC photos with Susann McDonald



In Sèvres. L to R: Catherine Huguet, Jeannine Palmieri, and 4th WHC Chair Bertile Fournier (1988).



4th WHC Board meeting in Sèvres (1990). L to R: (standing) Beverly Wesner-Hoehn, Jack Nebergall, Deane Sherman, Kumiko Inoue, Adina Haroz, Mario Falcao, Susann McDonald, Elena Zaniboni, Cristina Braga, Eleanor Fell, Linda Wood; (seated) Patricia Wooster, Sheila Larchet Cuthbert, Ann Stockton, Francette Bartholomé, Helga Storck.



With the 5th WHC Host Committee in Copenhagen (1993). L to R: Helen Davies, 5th WHC Chair Lillian Törnqvist, Mette Franck, Mette Nielsen.



At the 6th WHC in Tacoma with 7th WHC Chair Jana Boušková (1996).



L to R: 8th WHC Chair Chantal Mathieu, Milena Stanisič, and 9th WHC Chair Cliona Doris at the 8th WHC in Geneva (2002).



At the 8th WHC with Linda Wood Rollo and Isabelle Perrin (2002).



At the 9th WHC in Dublin with 6th WHC Chair Patricia Wooster and Ann Stockton (2005).



With 10th WHC Chair Ernestine Stoop in Bloomington, Indiana (2007).



With 11th WHC Chair Elizabeth Volpé Bligh at the 11th WHC in Vancouver BC (2011).



Late night gathering with former students and colleagues at the 11th WHC (2011). Standing: Isabelle Perrin (fifth from right), Susann McDonald (second from right), Karen Vaughan (far right). Seated: Linda Wood Rollo (second from right), Kathy Kienzle (far right).

Past WHC Host Chairs

1st WHC	Phia Berghout	7th WHC	Jana Boušková
2nd WHC	Esther Herlitz	8th WHC	Chantal Mathieu
3rd WHC	Josef Molnar	9th WHC	Cliona Doris
4th WHC	Bertile Fournier	10th WHC	Ernestine Stoop
5th WHC	Lillian Törnqvist	11th WHC	Elizabeth Volpé Bligh
6th WHC	Patricia Wooster		



L to R: Ursula Lendrot, Susann McDonald, and Vera Dulova in Munich (1983).



L to R: Phia Berghout, Susann McDonald, and Catherine Michel at the 1st WHC in Maastricht (1983).



L to R: Emmy Hürlimann, Tatiana Tauer, Susann McDonald, and Linda Wood listening to Focus on Youth at the 3rd WHC in Vienna (1987).