

An Interview with Carol Wood, April 2020

AP (*Afghan Press Music for the Harp*) – Tell us about your literary background

CW - I studied Medieval Literature for my doctorate from the University of Arkansas, and wrote my dissertation on a 9th century cycle of Welsh poems, the *Canu Heledd*, or the songs of Heledd. My course work was primarily in Medieval English literature (Beowulf., Chaucer, etc.) However, I was very lucky that my major professor had a passion for Old Icelandic and Welsh literature, so that I was able to read and study the great literature in those languages. We had tiny classes with only about three or four other nerdy students like me, and we would appear at each class with our translations from works like *The Mabinogion* or *Njal's Saga* and read them to each other.

AP – Can you tell us a little about your musical background?

CW - I had piano lessons from about age six, and my mother was a very gifted pianist and organist. I think my practicing probably got on her nerves, but she definitely instilled in me a love of music. I didn't begin to learn the harp until I was almost finished with my doctorate, writing my dissertation while teaching as an adjunct at McNeese. My husband and I went to a concert of the Lake Charles Symphony and one of the pieces was Debussy's Sacred and Profane Dances. I was enthralled, and I realized that there was a harp teacher on campus. On the day I wrote the last line of my dissertation, I went to Miss Belew's studio and inquired whether she ever took adult beginners. During our years of lessons, she taught me some basic theory, and when I started to make a few arrangements for harp, she also taught me some important composition rules, like avoiding parallel octaves and fifths. Since I have become more interested in composing, I have seriously studied theory on my own, but that leaves a lot to be desired.

AP - "What" is your inspiration?

CW - I think my inspiration probably comes from all over the map. When I first started to play the harp, my heroes were Kim Robertson and Sue Richards for their wonderful playing and the Breton harpist Alan Stivell because of the great Celtic music that he performed and preserved. That seems like ages ago, but they still inspire me. Today I'm also inspired by the astonishing number of really great pedal harpists there are out there, like Judy Loman, Yolanda Kondonassis, Elizabeth Hainen, and many others, even though I haven't written a single thing that could only be played on pedal harp.

When I think about what inspires me to write music, that too is all over the map. I know that my love for all kinds of poetry is a huge part of what inspires me. The very first pieces I wrote were settings of poems that I just thought *needed* to be sung: the carol of the field mice in *The Wind in the Willows*, and Thomas Hardy's beautiful poem, "Christmas Eve." But I'm also inspired to write by the natural world around me, and my new home, Vermont, is full of great beauty.

AP - Can you explain your passion for the time period you write from (for/about)

CW - There was a time when that question would have really meant "Can you explain your passion for the Middle Ages?" and that would have been easy to answer, since my very first book of music was *The Chaucer Songbook*. That inspiration definitely came from my years of studying and teaching medieval literature, and interestingly, that was the historical period in which harpists were probably at their most important, socially and musically. The English kings of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries all had court harpists who were generously rewarded for their talent. They were the rock stars of their age, with the finest horses, houses, and girlfriends.

Lately, though, my own writing interests have broadened out, and this new collection of songs has settings of works from Sappho to contemporary poets like the wonderful Amy Fleury.

AP - Tell us about your teaching at McNeese.

CW - I *loved* teaching, and I hope that over the years I learned how to become a fairly good teacher. I regularly taught the standard Chaucer course, and also the "bread and butter" English lit. survey courses. Those were really fun to teach, because every day you got to talk about thrillingly great poems and poets. It's wonderful now to be in touch with some of my former students, many of whom have gone on to become teachers themselves. And it always delighted me when a student would tell me that because of a course of mine, he or she now loved to read. Once, when I was in the checkout line at Kroger's, being checked out by a former student, he said, "I still remember that book we read in class, *Dangerous Liaisons*. That was great." That kind of thing is a high point in my life.

AP - When did you decide Vermont would be your new home?

CW - Short answer: after being here for about half of a day.

Longer answer: the family lore is that my husband fell in love with the girl on the Vermont Maid Syrup bottle when

he was little, and he said that when he grew up he was going to live in Vermont. After Hurricane Rita, when we were both at retirement age, we took a summer vacation here, just to look around. The first day, as we drove around the Green Mountains and looked at little streams and waterfalls and bucolic farms, I said, “I have to live here.”

AP - Would you care to share information about your family?

CW - I’m SO lucky. My husband is the poet John Wood, and he and I had a wonderful life together in Louisiana, both of us teaching at McNeese, and then we had about ten lovely years of retirement together here in Vermont, before John succumbed tragically to dementia. Shortly after John’s illness became clear to us, my son Dafydd and his family moved to Vermont to be with us. My wonderful daughter-in-law Rebecca Price is a midwife, and she very quickly established a thriving practice here. Dafydd, who has a doctorate in Comparative Literature from UT Austin (and whose translation of the French poem *Le Pont Mirabeau* is one of the texts I have set in this new book), is now working as the Events Manager for Northshire Books, which is one of New England’s most significant independent bookstores. It’s a milieu that he loves. And I have four beautiful and talented grandchildren.

AP - "Who" inspires you?

CW - I’ve already mentioned above some of the harpists who have inspired me. There are many composers who inspire me. Ralph Vaughan Williams is one, partly because of his feeling for English folksong and because of the influence folksong had on his music. I also love the contemporary Estonian composer Arvo Pärt for the deeply spiritual quality of his music, which can often somehow sound both medieval and contemporary. I love the lush, absolutely transporting choral music of the Norwegian composer Ola Gjeilo. And I’m inspired, too, by the female composers now receiving long-overdue attention, like Anne Dudley, who composed the beautiful, Celtic-inspired themes for “Poldark” and Hildur Guðnadóttir, whose chilling score for “Chernobyl” contributed so much of the atmosphere to that program. (And of course, now she is very famous as the Oscar-winning composer of the score for “The Joker.”)

AP - In terms of fitting music to text, which author is the most challenging to you?

CW - Since I’m not a professional composer and I can choose exactly what I want to work on, I don’t often have to deal with fitting music to difficult texts. I think I choose texts to set in part because I somehow sense the music already there. If I were commissioned to set a particular

text, that would be a totally different story. If I had to pick the hardest text to set in this collection, it might have been Stanton Hager’s really lovely translation of a poem by the 8th century Chinese poet Li Bai, because I felt it was so important to capture the poem’s sense of desperate, passionate forlorn-ness—(that’s not even a word, is it?)—and the way the natural world echoes that desperation in the foaming river or the mountain pass. But it was tremendous fun, too, to incorporate touches of the pentatonic scale for a Chinese flavor in the music, and even to imitate, in the harp part, the cricket’s chirrs that figure in the poem.

AP - In terms of fitting music to text, which author has proved to be the easiest?

CW - The easiest works I ever set were not in this collection but were the delightful little poems by X. J. Kennedy in his suite *The Beasts of Bethlehem*. After I realized that I wanted the music to suggest each animal in some way (the swooping hawk, the awkwardly swaying camel, the pouncing cat, with her little tango-like rhythm) the music became amazingly easy to write.

Maybe in this collection, the easiest text to set was “Proud Songsters,” by Thomas Hardy, which mentions various kinds of birds—the thrush, the finch, and the nightingale. By a lucky chance, I came upon a recording of the song of the American wood thrush (not, of course, a bird that the British Hardy could have been thinking of), and an adaptation of the wood thrush’s song became the primary motif for the whole piece.

AP - You have brilliant, interesting and diverse friends. Would you care to elaborate on that statement?

CW - That’s another way that I’ve had a very lucky life. When we were teaching at McNeese and John was directing the MFA program in Creative Writing, we regularly had very famous authors as guests, and in this way I got to know many brilliant writers, like X. J. Kennedy or Richard Wilbur or Larry McMurtry. And as John’s students graduated and began their own careers as writers, it became clear to the rest of the world that many of them were also “brilliant, interesting, and diverse.” For example, Adam Johnson won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2013 for *The Orphan Master’s Son*. And John’s former student Amy Fleury, who now directs the MFA program at McNeese, has produced two stunning, prize-winning collections of poetry that include poems that make me happy to be alive and less afraid of dying. I’m thinking here of her beautiful poem “When at Last I Join,” which she graciously allowed me to set, and which is included in this new collection.