

University of Mississippi
American Music Archive Field School

Document Type: Log of Interview with Anne Steel
Interviewer: Mary Amelia Taylor
Recordist: Tyler Keith
Interview Location: Oxford Middle School, Oxford, Mississippi
Date: Tuesday, May 21, 2010
Start Time: 8:00 a.m.
End Time: 9:00 a.m.
Time Elapsed: Approximately 1 hour

This interview explores Anne Steel's personal journey to and through the tradition of sacred harp singing. Mrs. Steel began singing sacred harp in Detroit, Michigan, but shortly thereafter married Dr. Warren Steel, current professor of music at the University of Mississippi and sacred harp devotee, and moved to Oxford, Mississippi. She describes her introduction to sacred harp and her experiences as she became a regular singer after her move to Oxford. The interview devotes much time to her personal feelings about her involvement in sacred harp singing.

The recording takes place in Mrs. Steel's empty classroom in Oxford Middle School, but a few times children's voices are audible from the hallway outside the classroom door. However, these minor sounds are not disruptive to the recording.

In this interview log, Anne Steel will be referred to using her initials, AS, and I will be referred to using mine, MAT.

00:45: AS explains that she was born in Detroit, Michigan, and gives a brief account of the circumstances that brought her to her current residence in Mississippi. Her first marriage took her to Cambridge, Massachusetts, and then back to Michigan, and her second marriage brought her to Oxford, Mississippi.

2:20: AS explains her occupation as a 7th and 8th grade teacher in Latin and "life" at Oxford Middle School.

3:06: AS did not come from a musical family; she explains that she was "the musical one," who took piano lessons from third grade through high school, sang with friends and her baritone ukulele, and sang in a chorus in college.

4:04: AS lists artists she enjoyed listening too through her growing years in the 1960s, including Donovan, Peter, Paul, and Mary, and the Beatles. She explains two singers who "grew on" her: Bob Dylan and Elvis Presley.

5:51: AS explains that she is not involved in any kind of

6:10: AS explains that she heard about sacred harp music through her soon-to-be (second) husband and became involved in singing with an inexperienced local group in Detroit who merely wanted to learn what sacred harp was about. She explains “laboriously practicing [their] parts” in the basement of someone’s house, spending a “grueling” 30 minutes on each song before singing all of the parts together. She says, however, that she liked it, despite the “ridiculous” learning process.

8:26: AS describes learning to sing sacred harp, especially the shape notes. Since she already knew how to read music, she could sing the notes immediately, but she explains that singing the *shapes* “fluently” has taken years to accomplish.

9:24: AS describes what attracted her to the music. She liked the music itself, the interweaving parts, and, though she didn’t religiously subscribe to the messages in the lyrics, she says that the words are equal in importance with the music. She also liked the regular, steady beat of the music and getting to beat time with her hand. The experience of leading and making eye contact with other singers also gave her a “close feeling” with them that she appreciated.

11:34: AS describes her first real sacred harp singing (not with the basement practicing group) in Chicago in April of 1989. She calls it a “mind-blowing” experience. She describes walking from the Chicago subway stop to the church building where the singing was being held and hearing singing faintly when she was a block away from the building:

“I thought, ‘That can’t be people singing. That can’t be the singing. I’m—I, I couldn’t be *hearing* them a block away. And as I got closer, the singing got louder and I realized it *was*. And my heart started to beat faster, and I was *so* excited. And I walked into the building, and when I opened the door, the noise just—hit me, like a, a punching bag. I stood in the back of this large hall area and just soaked it in. It was unbelievable—I had *no idea* that this was what sacred harp sounded like.”

13:54: AS describes the Chicago singing and what she learned about sacred harp there: there were about 250 people at the singing, many more than she had been used to in her 7- or 8-member basement practice sessions in Detroit:

“The power of it was overwhelming. Overwhelming. And I quickly saw that no one *practices* sacred harp. The goal is to get through songs, don’t waste time in between, and get as many in as you can, before the break.”

14:34: AS describes her first interaction with people at the singing: someone noticed that she “looked like a deer in the headlights” and found her a seat, “cram[ing] [her] into the alto section.” She then remembers, with widened eyes, hearing her name called, indicating that it was her turn to lead a song:

“I was—I was dumbfounded. I was terrified. I—I thought there must be another Ann Steel there. And I looked around, and the people in the alto section, who had asked my name, were saying, ‘Come on, come on, you can do it. Just follow the tenors in the front row.’ [*Laughs*] And people

were just sort of pushing me, gently pushing me. And before I knew it I was in the center, and somebody said, ‘46. 46, do 46.’ [#46 is called “*Let Us Sing*”] So I don’t think I’d ever *sung* 46, let alone *led* it, but somehow—well, the people just sang it, and I think I might have moved my hand at some point, but basically I was just standing there *drenched* in sound. And it was a powerful experience. It was terrifying, but it was wonderful.”

16:35: AS describes the room the singing occurred in, a “big, beautiful room with high ceilings” and “murals on the walls.”

18:21: AS explains how her marriage to Dr. Warren Steel catapulted her into sacred harp singing on a “regular basis.”

19:27: AS explains how she (and most singers) learned about regular singings: flyers, the Sacred Harp minute books,

20:35: AS explains that Dr. Steel had been singing sacred harp since he was in college in the late 1960s, but had begun singing regularly in 1980.

21:26: AS discusses the “combination of elements” that make up sacred harp singing, including the community of singers:

“Most people wouldn’t spend as much time and emotional energy singing with strangers. You sing to be with other people. And obviously when you sing in parts, you *need* other people.” AS describes the relationships singers develop with each other.

22:52: AS explains why “dinner on the grounds” is an important element in strengthening the community of singers—because it “gives you that time, when you’re *not* wasting time from the singing, to talk with people and catch up and see how they’re doing.”

23:30: AS describes the “community of the dead” at the singings, an “unspoken” presence or memory of deceased singers. She explains the “memorial lesson,” a time in larger singings set aside to read (and sing a song in memory or honor) the names of people in that community of singers who have passed away since the last singing or who are sick and not able to attend the singing. She describes how people record songs on recorders or cell phones to play for singers who could not attend the singings.

25:30: AS tells the story of her father’s only visit to Mississippi, one month before his death. She wanted her father, whom she describes as “tone-deaf” to attend a singing there so that he could understand this tradition she had come to love. Laughing, she confesses that “he was bored to tears! He lasted about 15 minutes.”

28:23: AS explains the difficulty of bringing people into the tradition. She explains that playing recordings for potential singers is highly ineffective and that the “best [way] is to try to get people to *come* to the singings.” AS states that, though “no one’s run away screaming,” she has “not had much success” bringing her family members and friends into the tradition.

29:30: She explains what she believes it takes to make a successful new singer: “there has to be some combination going in the people of musical nature, plus interest in old American traditions, valuing it as something historical, plus maybe having more connections with the people.”

31:07: AS discusses the importance of the “dinner on the grounds” tradition, including preparing the food:

“Events take up space in time—they have a beginning and an ending. But there’s also the anticipation of an event, and then there’s the memory of the event afterwards...So preparing the food is a way to anticipate the singing, while you’re doing something to get ready for it. And looking forward to seeing the people and hearing the music, and hoping the people will you’re your food, and deciding what to make—you know, should I make what I made last time, or should I bring something different?”

32:50: AS describes her rivalry with her husband about whose food is complimented more at singings. It seems that she is on the losing end; she describes an occurrence at the most recent singing she attended when a woman approached her in the middle of a song with a self-addressed envelope, asking if AS would send her the recipe for the “delicious spinach casserole” she brought. Only she didn’t bring the casserole; her husband did:

“I looked up at her, shot her daggers, and said, ‘I’ll tell my husband. *He* made it.’ [Laughs] So, after the singing I said to Warren, ‘That does it. I’m not cooking anymore for singings. You go ahead and *make* your spinach casserole. Get all the praise. Next time I’m bringing Kentucky Fried Chicken.’”

34:20: She, however, explains her plan for working on a signature dish, blueberry cobbler, which she’ll start bringing regularly so that “it will become famous.”

35:05: AS discusses the regularity of singings in north Mississippi, and estimates at least twelve a year.

36:23: AS explains that there are not many singers in north Mississippi and that most of them are older singers (with the exception of a few university students) compared to “pockets” of younger singers in Georgia and Alabama.

37:16: AS attributes much of the survival of sacred harp in north Mississippi to her husband Warren’s dedication; he “never misses a singing” and can sing any part that’s needed at smaller singings.

38:30: AS shares her fear that sacred harp in north Mississippi may be “in some danger,” unless more interest is generated in younger generations of people who are residents there (not transient students). She indicates, however, that nationally, the tradition is growing in encouraging leaps and bounds among “*many* young people who are *devoted*” to the tradition. She believes that these young people are needed to “revitalize” sacred harp in north Mississippi.

41:09: AS explains what it is about sacred harp that keeps *her* singing:

“It’s *everything*. It’s the feeling of sitting in the square singing with friends, and the familiarity of predicting that T.J. is going to lead “Idumea” and that Natalie is going to lead “Happy Land” and that Hugh Bill will chastise us for being late. It’s singing with people that I care about, this incredible music that’s *so* beautiful, and feeling my whole body engaged in it. Being able to sing a lot of the songs now without looking, having them in my head and just come out of me. Having the strong feelings evoked, by the music or by the words, of people in my life who have died that I miss, of things in nature that I am grateful for, that I’m reminded of. And all of that together is just an unforgettable experience that is unlike anything else.”

43:30: AS describes the kinds of songs she likes: “energetic. Although it can be *slow* and energetic. But then, what *isn’t* energetic in sacred harp?”

44:03: AS lists specific songs she likes, many of which evoke favorite memories. One example is “Sweet Rivers,” which “reminds me of the St. Clair River in Michigan, where I’ve spent time every summer of my life.” Another is “about crossing over, that I like to sing when I’m thinking about my parents.” It seems that the words are an important feature of the songs she likes; she mentions that there are songs she *doesn’t* like to sing because she does not like the words. She confesses that she generally favors major-key songs, while her husband usually likes minor ones.

45:46: AS describes the importance of, in choosing a song to lead, being conscious of what songs have just been sung or which songs will likely be called by others. She explains that there are times when one mustn’t lead a slow song, such as just after the somber memorial lesson or after lunch, when people are refreshed and ready to sing again (during an all-day singing), and that there are times when fast songs are less appropriate than slow, minor ones. She says that this awareness comes with experience.

47:29: AS explains that she doesn’t like one song that is “a little derogatory toward Jews.” She confesses that she will still sing this song if someone calls it, because “just because you sing something doesn’t mean it’s tattooed on your heart.”

48:43: AS explains that she has “become less and less doctrinaire the older I’ve got,” indicating that she tries to avoid leading songs that are expressly religious—that mention the “cross and Jesus dying for our sins.”

49:48: MAT concludes the interview.