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Salzedo's harp: The evolution of the modern pedal harp from the Paris conservatory culture to contemporary American musical society

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Abstract

Carlos Salzedo is one of the most important harpists of the twentieth century. Through innovative compositions, advocacy for modern music, and virtuosic performances, he modernized the pedal harp and brought it to a prominent position in contemporary music.

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SALZEDO'S HARP: THE EVOLUTION OF THE MODERN PEDAL HARP
FROM THE PARIS CONSERVATORY CULTURE TO
CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN MUSICAL SOCIETY

By

Celisa C. Gutierrez

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PREFACE

From the harp of King David, to the harp of Brian Boru in Ireland, to the harps played by angels depicted in the art of Fra Angelico, this instrument has existed for thousands of years in many cultures. However, the modern pedal harp of today bears little resemblance to the harps of the Ancients and the Classics except in the fact that it has strings that are plucked. Often seen in orchestras and professional music settings, it is much stronger, more versatile, and has a wide range of timbres. The harp has a rich history and Carlos Salzedo influenced its history in the United States in the early twentieth century. He adopted the modernization of the harp as his mission and pushed the limits, calling for a transformation of the instrument so that it could coexist with the ideas set up by contemporary music and its composers. In the process, he also significantly influenced and helped to shape American musical society after the First World War. This essay will explore the life and accomplishments of Carlos Salzedo, the historical context in which he worked, and the significance of his contributions to the professional harp literature.

BIOGRAPHY

Carlos Salzedo was born as León Salzedo in 1885 to Gaston Salzedo and Anna Silva in Arcachon, France. Shortly after his birth, his family moved to the French Basque region, his childhood home. Mostly mountainous farmland, the Basque region is earthy and distinct. The people are active and spend a great deal of time walking and spending time outdoors—their liveliness is apparent to any non-Basque. They are known for taking pride in their folk culture and traditions, including music and dancing. This culture was something Salzedo prized and esteemed. His favorite number was the number five, which is a prominent number in Basque dance rhythms. Many of his compositions were in a variation of five (i.e. 5/4 or 5/8) instead of the more usual meters of 3/4 or 4/4.

His father, Gaston Salzedo, was a well-known music teacher in Bayonne, where León (who later changed his name to Carlos) grew up. He sang in the Paris Opera as a young man and then later assumed position as the director of the music conservatory in Bayonne (Archanbo 37). His students were well known and successful. Salzedo's mother, Anna, was a court pianist for the Spanish Royal family in their summer home (Bitter 30). With such musical parents, Salzedo grew up with a strong affinity for music and his parents recognized his gifted nature.

Salzedo's musical genius was indeed noticed by others besides his parents at a very young age. The Queen Maria Christina of Spain called him her "petite Mozart", as he demonstrated superb keyboard skills at only three years old. As is the case with many musical prodigies, he began composing music early on (Bitter 31). His father felt that traditional schooling would not give him the time or guidance necessary to cultivate his musical skills, so he homeschooled him in an effort to focus on his son's musical

development. At the age of nine, young Carlos was admitted to the distinguished Paris Conservatory to study piano. He did incredibly well and won multiple awards and distinctions.

In 1896, he began to study the harp under the direction of famous harpist and teacher, Alphonse Hasselmans.ⁱ He took to the instrument naturally, and began to study with as much intensity as he devoted to the piano. "...in 1901, at age sixteen, he graduated in both piano and harp, winning on the same day the premier prix in both instruments---an unprecedented occurrence that has never been repeated in the history of the Paris Conservatory." (Archambo 38) This feat won Salzedo a great deal of acclaim and launched his career as a concert harpist. The musical elite were starting to recognize that Carlos Salzedo was no ordinary harp pupil, destined to play for afternoon tea and parlor visits in the French salon culture. He had a brilliant mind and was setting himself apart as a visionary and virtuoso.

After graduating from the Paris Conservatory, Salzedo toured Western Europe performing solo recitals and being received with great satisfaction. During the first four years of his tour, he performed equally on both piano and harp. However, with the demands of his touring schedule and his compositional endeavors, he realized that to make significant public progress, he was going to have to shift his focus to one instrument specifically. He chose the harp due to the fact that there were so few harpists. Harp literature was in desperate need of cultivation, because for years composers had little respect for it as a viable musical asset to either solo or orchestral literature. Rather, the harp was more or less a glorified piece of French furniture (Archambo 39). Salzedo set out to change that.

News of the young man's success was echoing across the Atlantic and he was beginning to receive attention in the United States. In 1909, Arturo Toscaniniⁱⁱ, then director of the Metropolitan Opera in New York City, specifically recruited Salzedo to come and play in the pit orchestra. It was rather serendipitous that Toscanini, one of the most prominent and important conductors in the world, would discover the young man and recognize his talent amidst the number of harpists that came from the Paris Conservatory. He gladly accepted and decided to travel to the new world that awaited him. He knew no English when he arrived, but he acclimated well to life in New York City. His time as first harpist for the opera served him well, because it gave him a chance to grow and gain professional exposure. When Salzedo began to deviate from the French establishment for the harp which considered it as a light hearted, fantasy-like instrument, he made quite an impression. An attitude like his was unfamiliar to harpists because most of them were steeped in the traditions of Hasselmans. Perhaps it was a profitable thing for the young man to leave for America, where he had more room to grow into his own ideas (Bitter 41-42).

After his time with the Metropolitan Opera, Salzedo toured the circles of high society in New York City, performing with musical skill and dedicating himself more fully to the harp and its development. After some years in America and a first marriage, he departed for a European tour. He formed a flute, harp, and 'cello trio with his friends George Barrère (flute) and Paul Kéfer ('cello). The three of them performed quite successfully around Western Europe until the start of World War I. Salzedo was drafted into the French army (Bitter 48-51) but after contracting pneumonia, he was honorably

discharged. He took some time to recuperate and then returned to the United States where he eventually became an American citizen.

After the war, Salzedo went back to his work promoting the harp with great zeal. In 1919, he co-founded the National Association of Harpists. It was first organization of its kind dedicated to the advancement of the harp. In order to help the association gain legitimacy, he obtained endorsements from influential and prominent composers including Serge Prokofieff, Serge Rachmaninoff, Ernest Bloch, Percy Grainger, and Edgard Varése (Bitter 126). Unfortunately the association did not last more than a few years because of how small a number of harpists there were in the United States at the time. However, the spirit of the organization lived on and many regional festivals were organized in the following years which helped bring the community of harpists together. Eventually, the skeleton of the National Association of Harpists was resurrected and became the American Harp Society, which is active today (Bitter 125-127).

Salzedo's passion for organizations and promotion of the harp kept him busy. The National Association of Harpists was only one project that he spearheaded. He was not however, exclusively concerned with the harp world. On the contrary, his excitement about contemporary music led to friendships with composers and other instrumentalists. Other groups that he co-founded or for which he worked as an administrator include the International Composers Guild, the American delegation of the International Society for Contemporary Music, and the Franco-American Musical Society. He also worked with many of these colleagues to create the Curtis Institute of Music (of which he was the first harp professor). It remains one of the most renowned music institutions in the country (Archambo 41).

The Curtis Institute of Music was founded from private endowment of one of Salzedo's friends, Mrs. Mary Louise Curtis Bok, in 1924. From its inception, the school attracted the best music pupils from all over the world who are serious about devoting themselves to instrumental music. Even up through World War II, the institute served as a beacon of high musical achievement. It was during his time at Curtis that Salzedo taught many pupils who followed his innovative and revolutionary harp technique. His students gave him a following of harpists who boldly moved away from the French traditions taught at the Paris Conservatory for decades (Bitter 198). Since the harp graduates won the most prominent orchestral and teaching positions around the country, the Curtis harp studio was a factory for Salzedo's method.

Salzedo was not only a busy teacher during the academic terms. In 1931, he established the Camden Harp Colony in Camden, Maine as branch of Curtis' music program (Bitter 60). It was a summer residential harp program where driven and advanced students who were serious about the harp made pilgrimage for summers of instruction and inspiration. Salzedo was particularly taken with the beautiful Maine shoreline and landscape. He kept a summer home there, where some of his students would stay. Others would rent rooms from local residents of Camden. "Besides having been referred to by the New York Times as the Harp Center of the Universe, the Colony is also known as the 'Musical Court of Miracles'..." (qtd. In Archambo 42) It posed as the perfect location for the study of harp music. Often the Camden Harp Colony served as a sort of experimental incubator for Salzedo's many compositions.

As the demands of these compositions increased, he needed a bigger, stronger, and more responsive harp. Thus, the Salzedo model was created at Lyon and Healy harp

makers. Salzedo worked with his friend Witold Gordon, who finalized the design plan. Its art deco aesthetic gives it a very contemporary look and distinctive profile (Lyon and Healy). The lines are clean and straight, with five sections in the column, five stripes on each side of the soundboard in red and silver, and five major sections to the bass—an homage to Salzedo’s favorite number. “This harp was an immediate success, not only because of its appearance, but also because of its exceptionally beautiful tone, and it has been used by many harpists of our leading orchestras, such as those in Philadelphia, Cleveland, Washington, and Cincinnati.” (Bitter 215) The Salzedo model harp has a resonant, full sound. The Lyon and Healy harps were the only harps manufactured in America at the time and they are known for their flexibility and resonant sound. They “...helped Salzedo mature in his development as a composer.” (Archambo 86) The American-made harps could support his full, dynamic, and innovative music.

Carlos Salzedo was an incredible combination of natural gift and innovative spirit. His work to modernize the harp not only increased the amount of music available to harpists, but he brought the pedal harp into a serious, respectable, and professional light. His influence as a virtuoso, pedagogue, and composer had lasting effects on the harp world and his method is so distinctive that many consider it an ideology or philosophy as well as technical genius. He is considered one of the most influential figures in music history for both the harp and for American music in the 1920’s.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The time during and after World War I brought about some growing pains for musical America. As is common during wartime, nationalism was strong and Americans felt a loyalty to their country. People were exhausted after such a terrible war and many wanted to be free from international influence both politically and musically (Watkins 288). However, Americans had long acknowledged the artistic authority that Europe possessed, and the idea of completely abolishing the European influence in American music seemed impossible, even for the strict 'Americanists'. Two main musical attitudes developed following World War I.

As a reaction to the atrocities of the Great War, an isolationist attitude developed in musicians who wanted to proclaim independence from foreign creative influences. Specifically, there was an anti-German sentiment. Once America began hearing about the European trenches in Western Europe, the universal sentiment changed quickly and it lasted after the war was over (Moser 169). These musicians focused their attention solely on American music. Interestingly enough, European music was still considered superior. In his book *Proof Through the Night*, Glenn Watkins explains that "However grand the hope for a new and binding federation at home that was no longer indebted to foreign influences, the struggle for a singular and independent voice in the concert hall had been largely unsuccessful." (283) The distinctly 'American' sound had not been found yet. Perhaps it was because America has been a country of international influences since its inception.

The second major musical group that was taking hold alongside Americanism was Modernism. The modernists were more interested in musical exploration and they did not

preoccupy themselves with international prejudice. Their focus was unearthing contemporary music. Since Europe was a prolific launch pad for Avant garde music, it happened that most of the composers in the modernist guilds and leagues were European. Carlos Salzedo himself was a modernist, although he preferred not to adopt self-descriptive labels. In contrast to the musicians of Americanism who wanted to be acknowledged specifically for their nationality, the modernists preferred to stay away from limiting descriptions, whether they were from schools of thought, philosophies, or heritage. Salzedo did eventually become a U.S. citizen, which helped promote the idea that music could be both modern and American at the same time. Salzedo's work in these organizations helped bridge the gap between European and American music in the 1920's (Watkins 282-288)

One of his most influential contributions to American musical culture was his co-founding of the International Composer's Guild with friend and fellow composer, Edgard Varèse. The mission of the Guild was to explore new music from a diverse group of composers (Lott 268). From its beginning, they adopted a "no repeats" policy and compositions were only allowed to be performed once. There was no discrimination in choosing works to be performed, so long as they were of high quality. Salzedo wrote for the *Eolian Review* that the group sought to discover and promote "vital and progressive" music and it did not acknowledge "repetition of known formulas, regardless of the fame, nationality or personality of the composer." (qtd. in Archambo 268) Due to its openness, the guild programmed a diverse range in compositional styles (Watkins 270). The critics were generally supportive, and so the audiences grew. Modernist music was launched into the American music scene and Salzedo was at the center of it. (Lott 266-286)

CONNECTIONS TO THE PROFESSIONAL LITERATURE

Salzedo's interactions with composers and prominent musicians gave him a widespread following which helped him to institute his ideas and gain exposure. This undoubtedly helped his efforts to modernize the harp. His compositions explored new sounds and effects, which gave them a new and unique flavor. His technical development is unparalleled by any other and he wrote many method books including *The Modern Study of the Harp* and *Method for the Harp*. These significant works were the first formal method publications for the instrument.

Carlos Salzedo was a visionary and a connoisseur for new music. He worked closely with composers and influenced the way they composed for the harp in their works. Due to his relationships with these composers, there was a significant increase in compositions which gave the harp a prominent role, especially in orchestral music. Not only was there more music overall, but the quality of the music was much higher. Under Salzedo's hand, the harp was becoming more respected and utilized, which was good news for the many harp students graduating from Salzedo's Curtis studio who hoped to have successful careers.ⁱⁱⁱ The music written in light of Salzedo's influence makes up the majority of harp literature (Patti and Pasternak).

Along with the increasing orchestral repertoire available to the harp, Salzedo's solo compositions are notable. In tandem with the development and improvement of the modern pedal harp, Salzedo wrote concert and study pieces that explored the possible and various effects available to the harp. Tapping the sound board, second partial harmonics, and "anvil" sounds (tapping a metal tuning key on the brass part of the harp) gave the harp an entirely modern—and possibly foreign—sound. The performance of such sound

effects also has striking visual appeal. The style is an acquired taste, but intriguing nonetheless. Salzedo performed his own compositions on the concert programs that he helped to organize and they were received well. For many musicians, these performances were the first time they heard serious and reputable music literature being played on the harp. What was once seen as a largely boring and limited instrument was now standing on its own and competing for respect alongside the other musical instruments. His compositions have become standard to the harp repertoire.

No discussion about Salzedo is complete without mention of his technical development. Salzedo steered directly away from his studies at the Paris Conservatory and challenged the status quo. Some took to it openly while others remained steeped in the French tradition. Salzedo's technique values tone and facility, in combination with strength and relaxation. Quality of sound and tone production (as opposed to convenience of playing) are priorities. This style of playing is characterized by an iconic attention to aesthetics. Salzedo was good friends with a Polish dancer named Vaslav Nijinsky. Nijinsky encouraged Salzedo to remember the importance of attention to visual detail in musical performance (Rushyama). Being inspired by dance, Salzedo's technique is often characterized by iconic gestures that enhance the music being played as the hands release from the strings.

REFLECTION

Carlos Salzedo radically changed how contemporary society values the modern pedal harp by developing a new school of technique and thought which incorporates the exploration of sound effects, idiom, and natural body movement at the harp. He sought to catapult the pedal harp into the 20th century by promoting it as more than a mere 'salon instrument' and brought it to the forefront of serious Classical music. Rather than associate with other concert harpists, Salzedo collaborated with prominent colleagues of other instruments. He co-founded the International Composers Guild with Edgard Varése to bring contemporary music into performance venues. The purpose of this project was to explore many of Salzedo's varied compositions for both solo harp and harp duet and to highlight the composer's important contributions to modern American musical society.

Taking the time to more fully understand the works of Carlos Salzedo has increased my credibility for my field of study. As a fourth generation Salzedo student, I can trace my musical heritage directly back to the composer. I have a strong connection to his philosophy and technique and this will continue to inform the way I approach the harp. I will be able to incorporate this new knowledge and experience from the project into my graduate studies in harp performance. My understanding of Salzedo and the intent behind his music will inform my performances and will help me to be a more effective performer.

The knowledge I have gained from this project will also affect my ability as a pedagogue. Having acquired a working knowledge of a significant portion of the standard repertoire for the harp will allow me to teach it in a more dynamic, intentional, and

knowledgeable way. I will be able to impart knowledge to my own harp students about Salzedo and his technique while also encouraging them to research and practice this music on their own.

Since much of Carlos Salzedo's music is either advanced or lesser known, this thesis research has brought to my attention the great need for valuable and reliable recordings of his music. Future students would benefit from such a resource. I hope to record and perform some of Salzedo's music in order to create educational references for harpists and their students.

APPENDIX A



The cover of the 1935 Lyon and Healy harp makers catalog, which features the Salzedo Model harp

APPENDIX B

**Salzedo's Harp: The Evolution of the Modern Pedal Harp from the
Paris Conservatory Culture to Contemporary American Musical Society**

**Senior Thesis Recital of Celisa Gutierrez
The Honors College at Eastern Michigan University
April 18th, 2016 • 7:00 p.m.**

Preludes for Harp Alone (1917)

1. *Quietude*
3. *Introspection*
4. *Whirlwind*

Poem of the Little Stars (1928)

Pentacle Suite for Two Harps (1928)

1. *Steel*

with Katherine Oppermann, harp

La Désirade (1929)

Chanson dans la nuit (Song in the Night) (1929)

with Professor Ruth Myers-Brown

Suite of Eight Dances (1943)

Rumba

with Professor Ruth Myers-Brown and Katherine Oppermann

Scintillation (1936)

*This recital is given in partial completion of the Senior Thesis
for The Honors College at Eastern Michigan University.*

*Celisa is pursuing University, Departmental, and Highest Honors.
She is part of the harp studio of Professor Ruth Myers-Brown.*

ⁱ Alphonse Hasselmans was the professor of harp at the Paris Conservatory when Salzedo studied. He was known for his large and demanding personality and his gifted pedagogy skills. He wrote many compositions that are characteristic of the French 'establishment' for harp solo repertoire. His music is steeped in Romanticism and because of its sentimentality, quickly grew out of fashion as serious concert repertoire. However, his pieces are still commonly taught for their pedagogical value.

ⁱⁱ Arturo Toscanini was an Italian conductor who was well known for his phenomenal musical interpretations, especially in the orchestral and opera settings. He conducted the Metropolitan Opera and the Philharmonic Orchestra in New York in the 1920's. He is considered one of the most important conductors of the early twentieth century.

ⁱⁱⁱ Salzedo's students were placed in the most prominent orchestras all over the United States. The majority of these students were women and often, they were the only women in the orchestras. His student, Edna Philips, was the first woman to play in the Philadelphia orchestra. She was hired in 1930.

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