

The Legacy of Raphael Weisman

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Exquisite craftsmanship, outstanding tone, and soft, simple designs distinguish the handiwork of luthier Raphael Weisman. Originally a creator of early instruments such as the lute, bandora, and vihuela, Weisman has been a leader in the harp therapy and lever harp movements since the seventies. Now, as he retires in order to make room for other endeavors, he leaves behind him a legacy that continues to grow.

Weisman was born in South Africa but became interested in early instrument construction in Israel. Eventually enrolling in an early instrument construction program in England, he became a central part of the then-blossoming European early music revival.

At this time Weisman completed the only accurate replica of a Spanish vihuela dating from c. 1500. The project was a graduating qualification in the tradition of the Spanish luthiers, who after many years of apprenticeship had to prove candidacy to the luthier's guild by creating a "a large instrument made of very many pieces with a unique design". The vihuela is stunning, covered with complex geometrical marquetry in ivory, ebony, and other woods. The attention to detail and craftsmanship Weisman demonstrates in this instrument continues to be evident in his harps.

Weisman founded "Harps of Lorien" in New Mexico in the mid-seventies as a "co-operative business with a mission to provide quality hand-crafted instruments for healing." Each harp is subjected to a process of blessing and praying during the sanding and finishing.



Raphael Weisman with Eagle Harp, made for Talia Rose

Wood choices are kept simple: cherry or walnut. Weisman says, “Cherry has a tighter voice, like the wood, which has a round and tight grain. The wood in the walnut has an open grain and so has a feeling of amplitude. It is Boomier, deeper, darker, mellower than the cherry.”

Even though the harps are blessed and prayed over in the construction phase, it is during the sanding process that the instruments receive their special blessing as the grain reveals its beauty and the maker gets to caress the instrument while sanding. Weisman uses many layers of Tru-Oil, a linseed oil base finish, which he advocates for the way it reveals the natural beauty of the wood, following the grain and lending a mellow luster. In the final process, a piece of silk is used to polish the finish. After many years, he says, the appearance may dull, requiring another layer and some polishing.

Weisman’s background in early music construction exerted a strong influence on his harpmaking. However, when constructing early instruments the luthier is restricted to making exact copies, and the focus is upon carefully discovering and re-creating designs from centuries past. In his harpmaking, Weisman discovered a new creativity and pursued designs which make his Harps of Lorien visually distinctive from other harps.

These lever harps are recognizable by their rounded, sculptural design and the glowing character of their wood, as well as the outstanding rich and clear tone. Harps range from the

tiny Sasha 22, which is an economy harp designed to fit in the overhead bin of an airplane to the Joy 38, which “plays like a breeze and rings like a bell.” Weisman is known for carvings of eagles on the column which seem ready to take flight, and as Jennifer Leibnitz, harp teacher and dealer in Kansas City, says, “Each harp is unique. I don’t know what that secret ingredient might be, but sometimes it shows up in the form of a beautiful engraving or inlay of some kind, which is just standard for him.”

Laurie Riley, author of such books as “The Harper’s Manual”, “Basic Harp for Beginners”, and “How to Start a Music Program in Your Local Hospital or Hospice”, says “I have a 26-string harp by Raphael Weisman which I got when I was confined to bed. I had been looking for one that was lightweight enough to play lying down and small enough to handle with weak arms. It was perfect. It got me back into playing, and I love it so much that I continue to use it. In spacing and string tension, it feels like playing a bigger harp, and it has a huge tone for a small harp.”

Christina Tourin, founder of the International Harp Therapy Program, says, “Raphael is one of those visionaries who has enriched the harp world with his beautiful harps and kind and generous persona. Each of my students that bought a Raphael Therapy harp were thrilled to know that he embedded messages of positive intentions in the harps – it made it all the more special.”

Raphael Weisman is retiring from harpmaking to follow other pursuits, including the organization of a worldwide celebration of interconnectedness taking place on November 11 (11/11/11), information for which may be found at www.liveasone-11-11-11.com. Before he retires, however, he is ensuring that his harps continue to be available through training others to build them. He envisions young people from war-ravaged countries such as Serbia and Croatia apprenticing at Harps of Lorien and taking the fine art of harpmaking back to their countries to establish more cooperative companies, utilizing the harp as an instrument for peace. “I want to see the harp become as common in most households as the guitar used to be. Whatever I do it’s always my intention to see how I can use it to benefit as many people as possible.”

Wherever he applies his energies in the future, Raphael Weisman will bring with him a visionary passion, which will positively impact the world around him, continuing the near-

legendary impact of his harps and person in the far-flung world of harps and harp therapy. Harpists who own his harps will continue to change lives with their music, and eventually new harps will be made, providing a new generation of harpists with instrument of outstanding beauty and tone.

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The website for Harps of Lorient is www.harpsoflorien.com

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We are extremely grateful to Emily and the American Harp Society for this wonderful tribute.