

Becoming Harpistic

by *Therese Schroeder-Sheker*

I'm a harpist, and it would be reasonable if that statement evoked in you an image related to an orchestra. It might also conjure the memory of your experience of an intimate 20th century chamber ensemble – perhaps it was composed of harp, oboe, cello and voice. Some readers will stretch farther back and imagine the French troubadour of the late middle ages walking toward a Cistercian monastery, or the bardic harper of a Celtic twilight composing an air for a newly deceased patron.

Unlike the piano of modern invention¹, an instrument which became standardized with its 88 keys in merely two hundred years of development, cultural history allows us to witness a host of harps as they freely and organically change in size, shape, construction, stringing and pedagogy from culture to culture across four thousand, five hundred and twenty-some years. Harps span cultures from ancient Egypt to Iona, from the Court of Burgundy to the metropolitan cities of New York, London, Paris and Berlin. Regardless of origin or placement – temple or castle – non-mechanized



A younger T holding a reproduction of a Queen Mary Harp

harp seem to reflect a pristine form of inspiration related to each nation or culture. They are made of fallen hornbeam, walnut, maple, spruce, cherry and yes, even ivory, and were strung with cat gut, sheep gut, horsehair, and single strands of metal. Upon rare occasion, a harp was strung with an amalgam of silver, copper and gold.

The several non-mechanized harp cultures of the Western Isles of Scotland flourished in schools of music where the complex rhythms, textures, fingering systems and melodies were passed down in oral tradition from bardic master to circles of earnest pupils. I am deeply indebted to Dr. Karl Jost of the University of Tennessee for his insightful works on early medieval Celtic education and theology. He explores the plusses and minuses of the transition from an oral-aural educational tradition to that of the visual-written tradition. He identifies and nuances the eventual losses absorbed with the shift from a learning system originally motivated by “the sheer love of it” which nurtured the “faculties of the Soul” and the condition in which it found itself after the change. The Celtic Bardic and the Celtic Hedgerow systems of recitation, writing, reading, and an entirely engaged bodily sensorium – sound, touch, light, fragrance, taste, and more – resulted in an embodiment process in which in a vast and famously elastic memory flourished.

Artists held and embodied entire epics by heart. Please, contrast this to the fact that the average person today cannot remember a few items for the market without making a list, whether on paper or in the cell phone. This remarkable acuity and Bardic elasticity squeezed itself into the new form coming over the horizon, the one that makes way for what shall later be called ‘literacy,’ (as if the former cultures were illiterate, synonymous with uneducated). The musical material taught in the ancient Bardic way required many years of formation, and consisted of a series of archetypal patterns, rhythms and melodies that supported this expanded memory. Students fasted from food while learning riddles and *enigmata*, verses and refrains, ballads and epics. The music, learned by heart, could be recited or played for one another so it could be corrected



and encouraged by the master or the peers. Later, it could be given away by a soloist during dramatic fire-lit evenings of praise, ballad, lament, and love song. These hours of music were received by peasantry and royalty alike; the musicians and their traditions delivered living histories and served culture and community in acts of enormous creativity. Some harpers insisted they never played for hire. They had patrons, but considered their roles as walking-living-memories as a form of covenant or sacred service to the good of the community. A different harp tradition unfolded in continental Europe, one primarily featuring consorts and mixed instrumental ensembles, though this harp culture also remained an oral tradition until about 1550 though quite different in character from the Celtic model.

In marked contrast to the first two traditions, the harp culture of contemporary university and conservatoire pedagogy gradually became systematized, quietly restrained, well defined, organized, and culturally hierarchical in that it acknowledged and elevated a costly, large, fully mechanized, first single and then double action symphonic pedal harp, to the exclusion of the wide array of historical harps and their respective literatures from antiquity through the Renaissance. In the 1920's and 30's, an American university and conservatory harp pedagogy naturally flourished as a result of a rich written tradition, peppered by about 100 years of one-of-a-kind magisterial specialist tomes published in the late 1800's and early 1900's. In the 1920's and 30's, alongside the artistry of Carlos Salzedo at Curtis, Marcel Grandjany at Julliard, Lucile Johnson at Eastman and Lucy Lewis at Oberlin, an American harp culture blossomed.

This phase was then largely rekindled and in many ways expanded through the concentrated scholarship of the Detroit-born harpist and art historian Roslyn Rensch (1923-2021). Soon, other similarly engaged performing-publishing-scholar-artists followed her lead. Ms. Rensch wrote and published prolifically between 1950 and 1988, and held several leadership positions in congresses and professional associations. With those 60 years of cultivation, by 1980, the world of harp was newly equipped. It had or launched a veritable arsenal of fine texts, specialized journals, international congresses and competitions, national conferences, supportive societies and professional associations, new composers, a variety of master luthiers and harp manufacturers, distinguished publishing houses, outstanding recordings of solo and orchestral harp masterpieces, and newly configured graduate and undergraduate degree programs. A thoroughly formal professional harp culture emerged.

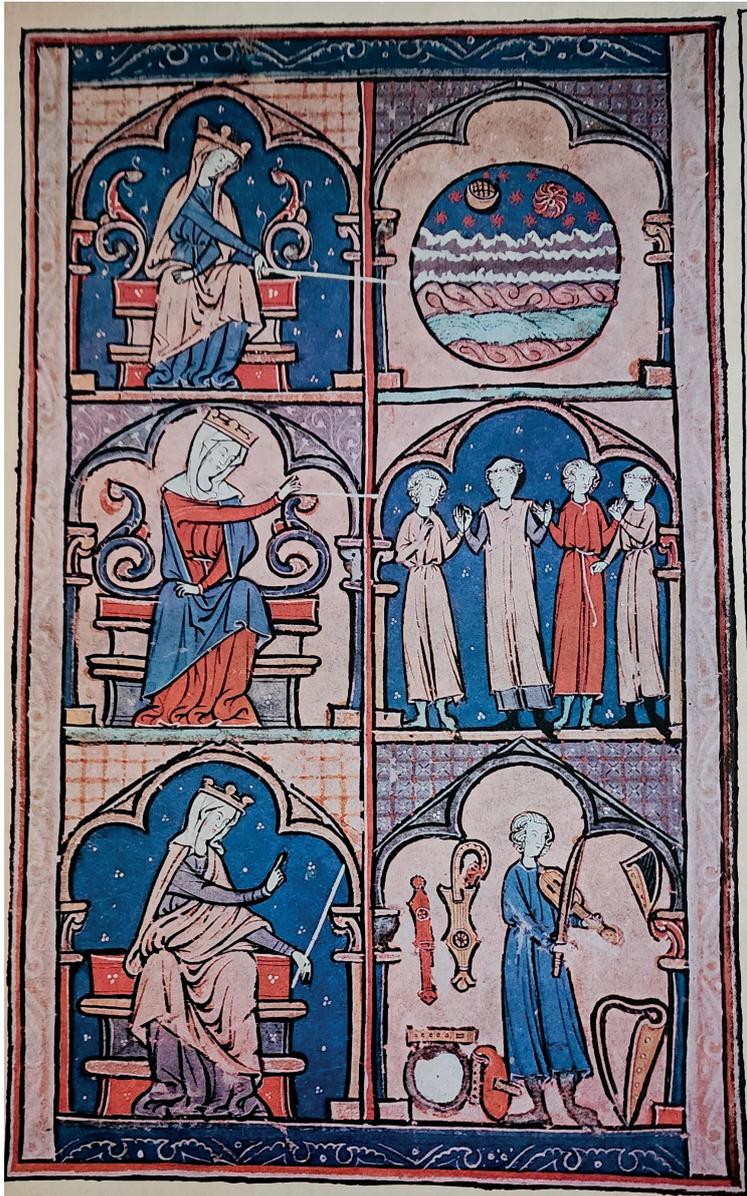
One found a rigorous emphasis on harp technique, performance practice and repertoire. Some American universities and multiple European settings included harp history, though many regarded that focus as a dimension of either ethnomusicology or the exclusive

domain of medieval studies. Some harp faculties excelled in scholarship and composition. Students typically learned performance practice through diligent studies and etudes linked to fingering exercises, exercises in modality, tonality and transpositions, rhythm and texture, and these are all immediately applied while learning to perform the complex scores of classical, romantic and 20th century literature. These harpists mastered dance forms and played sonata and concerto literature with verve.

Can you guess where this is going? We have visual and audible cues in abundance, documentation in spades, and seemingly every possible supportive structure required of a learned harpistic professionalism. Today's contemporary harp graduate programs are as rigorous and as competitive as the curricula of any medical, nursing or law school, and equally outwardly directed toward gainful employment. Stated differently: success. The goal is typically an orchestral or professorial tenure track appointment. But with this advance, I can't help but wonder about the loss of our deepest and earliest sources of musical meaning. Wasn't there another dimension to professionalism incorporated into musical formation not so long ago? Is it possible or even reasonable to cultivate a renewal of the spiritual and philosophical dimensions of music, shorn of any misguided nostalgia? What *was it* that once helped bring profession and vocation together, as a single wholesome unity? Equally urgent, is it possible to anchor such formation projects independent of religion or academia?

The 6th century Roman philosopher Boethius once described music as an all-pervasive force streaming throughout the universe, weaving body, soul and spirit together. It is a fact that his Platonic masterpiece (*The Principles of Music*) was once integrated into every liberal arts curriculum and was required source reading for all budding musicians. This is not necessarily so now. The brightest lights in music, theology, medicine and philosophy were once unashamed to address the harmony of the spheres. They were intimate with the role of music to awaken the human spirit because it was normal for a physician or a philosopher to play in a string quartet, for love. People were conscious of music's capacity to nurture the development of human character, and by extension, the possibility of human health and well-being. For these reasons, Plato understood the role of music in the formation of the nation. Citizens capable of becoming sound leaders, capable of reason and proportion, also created cultures that reflected the laws of musical proportion and harmony in their decision-making. Discord was its own diagnostic.

Several of my own professors and teachers were greatly accomplished artists, some of them toweringly so, and many were truly selfless despite their remarkable pedigrees. The humanity expressed in their daily acts of wisdom, encouragement and discernment fostered in their students a devotion to composition, performance



From author's private collection:
Boethius' Three Worlds

practice and education. I remain permanently awed and grateful to each of them. Despite access to all this professionalism, it is difficult today to find the possibility of a *spirituality of musicianship* mentioned anywhere outside of faith-based seminaries training people for ordination or graduate programs devoted to liturgical music. The harpistic educational emphasis is largely outwardly and concretely directed – it concerns itself with repertoire, technique, resume and employment. Academics have inculcated a modernist idea that spirituality has no valid place in a scientific professionalism.

Be that as it may, academia is in disarray. The shift thirty years ago from a pedagogical model to a business model hasn't helped culture. It filled coffers. The longing for a renewed spirituality and/or for a spiritually inspired *vocation* is one reason for the continued development of new and very independent institutes all over the world. Whether devoted to iconographic

arts, music, poetry, publishing, conducting, eurythmy, sophiology, spiritual psychology, ecology, medicine, nursing, pharmacology, law, ethics, farming, hospice, or inspired reconciliation projects, we find a recurring renewal of spirituality as the *zeitgeist* over-lighting freely standing institutes all across the globe. Interestingly, these institutes are modest, human scaled endeavors, not vast monuments. Second, the best of them are born of profound commitment, and third: the finest know that they exist to serve something and someone, rather than an opposite.

What would it take for a learning community to be unashamed to think deeply about a spirituality of musicianship? It could take a number of different forms. For the past thirty-five years, I have been calling this very perspective *Contemplative Musicianship*. As an educator, I cling to the insight voiced by an august Harvard dean named Dr. Samuel Miller. He winced in dismay because he knew the ease with which a student of the divinity school could emerge under the rubric of a *magnum cum laude* graduate degree without any sign of an interior transformation, much less to a commitment about a pastoral vocation or an ordained ministry. Dr. Miller appreciated that scholarship entails a disciplined skill set, and that it is possible for a learned person to master the technique of scholarship, methodology and all, while remaining uninvolved and even hermetically sealed from the content over which they spend so many years of study. Someone exceedingly well-educated and well-positioned who had mastered New Testament Greek once looked me straight in the eye and said: "But Therese, I don't *believe* any of this mumbo jumbo." He never allowed himself to receive or consider or metabolize the words, the content, the meaning, the message. He remained scientific. This is one of the reasons why Dean Samuel Miller commented that "*Technique is a way of getting results without engaging the Self.*" I understood the nature of our most modern malaise. In music too, it is possible to master the technique needed to play a concerto without having developed one's humanity in any way. Parts of ourselves can remain dormant while one part of us seems to excel. To our shame, one can lie and cheat and betray another over that large grant or the new position that just opened, yet still deliver the Mozart. This is true in every field, every profession.

Aspects of the compartmentalism or loss of the inner life (and its antidote) are underscored in a fine documentary film about Dr. Robert Coles and his lectures given at Harvard Medical School, as well as his seminars on the *Literature of Social Reflection*. The documentary (*Robert Coles: Teacher*) shows how students occasionally stumbled out of his talks in a form of metanoic awe. *What just happened?* Several students each in different ways remark how life-changing it is to read literature together, in small circles, to read out loud, *together*, to hear and participate, *together*, to be able to enter and share a new kind of learning by

steeping oneself in the characters of the stories until they find themselves living and breathing with those same characters, befriending them, knowing them from the inside, knowing them slowly and in a fullness which includes both folly and glory. While reading about the hero or the villain, or all the average folk in between, we recognize parts of ourselves. Those Harvard students were not studying dogma or doctrine or scientific principles in abstraction. Coles was inviting the students who worked in small circles to risk living.

Students were shaken to discover through these readings that they experienced a new spirituality. The *spirituality of the ordinary* rose up in front of them, as did a *lived spirituality of daily life*. They had been groomed for success but saw in those hours that the plumber or the cleaning lady had sometimes developed an inner awareness, a different form of participation, a more awakened consciousness, and perhaps a greater wisdom than they. The workers weren't functioning as expert authorities through the safety net of theory or abstraction, and they weren't buffered by titles, money or privilege.

In a Raymond Carver story, a down and out guy smoking too many cigarettes quietly accepts the verdict when the doctor says: It's cancer. A blind person experiences a cathedral despite all odds. A bit of male-female jealousy pokes holes in all of us. The stories offer a *different form of teaching* that introduces an art of reflection. The darkened hindrances and flickering lights of lived life are right there in the open throughout the day; one needn't go to exotic places to have a vision or to meet one's destiny. It's right there in front of us. The students realized in heart and mind: many of the characters in the stories embodied wisdom far beyond those of the teachers with their titles. In one section of the documentary, Coles has the moral courage to share a personal story with the students, about how and why the cleaning lady knew more than he did during his mother's death. He had been the famous and lauded doctor, but it was she who taught him how to honor his mother's life and her death.

There is a moment when a Coles protégé looks up and into the camera with a sad but disarmed smile and say quietly that he realizes it is possible to graduate with straight A's and yet "flunk life." The human-making curriculum is no longer supported in formal education tracks so much as it has been returned to the realm of human biography. The events and conditions of our daily lives and of the choices we make throughout each day vividly constellate something akin to the initiations of old, only now the tests are reconfigured! How we meet each affliction and joy, each obstacle and hindrance, each illusion or attachment, each blessing and opportunity – these are the raw materials that make or break the human being and birth the new life, a fuller life. William Wordsworth's *A deep distress hath humanized my soul* comes to mind as the jewel in the crown. Sometimes the

doctorate is less formative than the broken heart. I've been living with Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *The Mystery of Holy Night* again, during Advent, and had tears in my eyes to read the single startling sentence: *He has loved my worst enemy no less than myself*. Doggone it.

With these things in mind, I wanted to offer a picture of a few small, incremental, largely invisible ways and means that can be inhabited when the world is in chaos and we ourselves are seeking to live spirituality more authentically. The time is now, despite the horror of war, the degree of ecological upheaval, the encroaching artificial intelligence, and the vast immoral global corporatocracy that is more powerful than many governments.

However unlikely, it is true that I too became one of those professionals, at least in some ways, in that I made my Carnegie Hall debut as a harpist and singer, toured the world, concertized everywhere, published and recorded, won awards, was featured on multiple television documentaries, and enjoyed several esteemed faculty appointments. The music is and was beautiful, and a life in and with harp has been indescribably kind and generous, creative and startling. But more important than my life in classical music has been the work lived in end-of-life palliative medicine.

This has everything to do with this possibility I've been suggesting about a spirituality of musicianship. The day came when I turned around and looked at the harp and saw that if I paid attention, that life with harp was not unlike living under the same roof with a revered retreat master. It was indeed an instrument for making music audible, but it was also a vehicle for a different kind of awakening: a seeing, imagining, perceiving, listening, hearing, experiencing, encountering tested in endless acts of fine-tuning. The strings of the harp are anchored in the soundboard and then stretched straight up into verticality. The earth-sky axis is visible. For the entire lifetime of a harp, before the pressure of the torque causes it to crack or implode or explode as many do after a hundred years or so, the assignment allotted to a harp is one of *maintaining the tension of opposites*. The strings are always being pulled in two opposite directions at once, while maintaining verticality, and in fact the stretched strings cannot even create beauty without this tension. A slack string goes thud. A beautifully tuned string ripples out into space and dissolves but not before entering us at one level or another. Medicine and diagnostic imaging both understand that sound conduction occurs through air, bone and water. Every time one plays, even when we are playing for others, the sounds also anoint and penetrate both doer and receivers. We humans are capable of receiving sound in body, soul and spirit. This fact came to me in spades amidst the pressures and messiness of ordinary life.

Fifty years ago, as a young woman, my best friend Laurie was pregnant with her first child, and as she grew

great, she spoke excitedly about this new thing called natural childbirth. I listened to her as she described going to classes with her husband to learn about the breathing techniques, and about the ways in which a partner could support a woman in labor. He could sit behind her and support her bodily when she was struggling and exhausted. I hadn't realized how deeply this imagination of a supported labor had entered into my own soul, but it did.

I had been working part-time as an orderly in a geriatric home to support myself while studying music and had many spiritually jarring experiences while there. Sometimes the elderly and the newly deceased were treated disrespectfully, and the bodies of the dead were handled in ways that left me ashamed. It is true that an immediate thought was to quit that place and seek employment elsewhere, but for some reason I stayed until being able to go for a long soul-talk with someone I admired greatly. He was an inspired priest-philosopher. Together we walked through quiet university streets and talked, and eventually sat together on a park bench. I wanted him to relieve me of the personal responsibility of making a decision, or to be a kind of authority figure and validate the skittish impulse to flee. I hoped he would say *run don't walk*, but no, he offered a spiritual jujitsu. Stay there, protect them, don't run away. He spoke with wide-awake clarity and tranquility.

He also looked me straight in the eye and with earnestness said that I would need to grow a great deal, to grow beyond my own religious identity and to become more spiritual than religious, more capable of serving another in their own way, the way they needed, not a proscribed manner, and not a way proscribed by the corporate culture or my faith identity. Period. He said I would need a new formation in order to help and to serve. He then encouraged me to grow enough to be able to love and cherish other scriptures in order to try to understand people of every walk and culture. Surprisingly, I had copies of many of the Good Books at home, the Jewish, Christian, Buddhist, the Taoist, and people had gifted me with Egyptian and Tibetan texts, though I had not yet opened them. I took the priest's words to heart, knowing that it was a lifetime work, not a university study. He was a great soul, and his counsel equipped me for life itself.

Not long afterwards, I found myself in a room where a man was suddenly dying of emphysema. He was a combative person who was never visited by family or friends. He would throw food plates and feces and swear at the charge nurse and all four of the orderlies. During an in-service, a brief teaching update that can precede a change in shift, the nurse had explained that all medical interventions for his condition had been exhausted; nothing more could be done for him. She said that we could expect that sometime in the next day or two, or this shift or the next, during a rough coughing spell, he would cough too deeply and his paper-thin lungs would

simply burst. I listened but hadn't yet awakened to the power of what it was that was actually unfolding. Maybe one of the other orderlies would get the assignment. The charge nurse looked at all four of us and landed on me. *I'd like you to take him, Therese.* My assignment seemed to have occurred by chance, and yet just think about it. Had I been on call the day before or the day after, I would not have been there at the critical hour of his need, and his death and the remainder of my life and the lives of many others would have unfolded very differently.

When I entered his room, the death rattle was already very loud, and he was thrashing in bed. That was how a drowning in bed happened back then, whereas today a person would receive adequate sedation as part of the rubric called compassionate comfort care. At the time, I had exactly zero medical education. When I heard the scraping, gasping and gurgling, an aural phenomenon I had never before known in this lifetime, pure common sense and courtesy rose up from within like an untapped wellspring. I approached the man, calling out his name, reaching for his hand, yet still aware that I might get a thrashing, verbal or physical. This did not happen. At first touch, I understood viscerally that he was terror-stricken and in the deepest throes of the death-bed anguish. He clutched my hand.

Without thinking, my immediate response was to crawl up into his bed and position myself behind him – his emaciated back upon my chest – the way I had heard Laurie describe that a spousal partner could support a woman in labor. My legs were folded back and yet wrapped around him, and my hands went naturally to his forearms. I was basically a skin to skin chair for him, a feminine easy chair. Unlike all the times earlier when he would push one of us away, he trusted and rested back into me. I did the only thing a person could do, and that was to be. I chose to be... for *him*. I held him, warm hands on his arms, the power of touch, wordlessly letting him know he was not alone, I said his name, tried to breathe deeply for him, and finally, again, a natural responsivity: I began to sing very quietly. This was not a clinical decision.

I sang the repertoire I knew and lived and that was entirely embodied and ensouled: the unmetered music of Gregorian chant. I sang my way through the *Mass of the Angels*, the *Mass of the Blessed Virgin Mary*, the *Adoro te devote* of Thomas Aquinas, and the *Salve Regina*. One doesn't run and seek permission in an opening like this; one simply does what one can and prepares to get in trouble later. I held him and alternated moments of silent breathing with the chant. We proceeded together. It was a genuine musical sacramental midwifery. I felt and experienced him go from a living breathing warm human being, skinny as he was, and as the life animating him dwindled, and his lungs emptied of air, I felt him grow cold. After he died, I didn't move, but held him in that position for what seemed like a long time. The

other women had peeped their heads in the door and tiptoed out right away, covering the rest of the patient load between them. I walked home that night across a field, gazing up at the moon and stars, knowing that I could never be the same.

My life had only just begun, but this was a turning point and destiny moment from which the rest of my life would germinate, only because a door opened. His death was a portal. I have always thought of that day as the Ur-Vigil. It was the seminal moment.

This recollection allows me to return to the urgent timing of a reflection on the nature and meaning of service, of the possibility of a spirituality of music, and of the possibility of admitting something like receiving divine assistance to live a life of meaning. Perhaps the guardian angel is always available, if we are not too professional to admit it. Perhaps we can still be inspired.

The man with the emphysema was fully and utterly human, but his intense need facilitated a death-bed transformation. It allowed something of the angelic to become visceral and visible. He taught me that becoming a harpist was only a beginning, and that *becoming harpistic* was something else, something quite different, something coming from another dimension, and would be the work of a lifetime.

I need to collapse this image for the purposes of this article, but suffice to say that the mystery of his life and the mystery of his death propelled me into theology, philosophy, and the study of medicine. An additional seventeen years of study and research allowed me to develop and found the palliative medical modality of music-thanatology and its flagship institute the Chalice of Repose Project. I have just completed my fiftieth year of working with the physical and spiritual needs of the dying through the delivery of prescriptive music, and yes, it is true, when asked, when requested, we brought and continue to bring harp and voice to every bedside wherever people are dying, in every medical setting, hospital, hospice, long term care, private homes.



This 13th century gold and silver chalice is a guiding treasure of The Chalice of Repose Project.

I have lived long enough to have worked with thousands of men, women and children as they approached their death, that passage we call *transitus*, full of movement. Together, my colleagues and I have walked with tens of thousands of people in their final hours and moments. Culture used to be unashamed to call upon the language of *vocation*, and I have grown to appreciate that it is possible to live a life of vocation-profession by serving the needs of the dying and by becoming harpistic rather than only by being successful.

We don't live in a perfect world and the house is truly on fire. Whether we are safe at home or in an area that is being bombed, not one of us will ever need to go out searching for our destiny. All the teachers and teaching ever needed arrive unbidden, if we allow ourselves to become present to them, resisting the temptation to ignore or push them away. But remember, all the openings, even the most spiritual of openings, descend upon us or arrive at our doorsteps amidst the chaos, noise, mess and slop of the world. Becoming harpistic has helped me learn how not to flee, and instead, how to maintain the tension of opposites needed to live and to serve and to ever-so-quietly inhabit the most beautiful word in the world: *Yes!*

Therese Schroeder-Sheker lives in Oregon, USA.

Endnote

1. The history of the piano (pianoforte) begins around 1700, with Bartolomeo Cristofori, and not unlike the harp, undergoes a wide range of developmental stages, varying in size, shape, construction, weight and number of octaves, but the instrument prototype of 1867 which featured 88 keys became standardized, that is, accepted by most piano manufacturers by the year 1900.



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