Rhett is a classical and Celtic harpist, an organist, composer, conductor, cellist, and French horn player. He utilizes the harp for music for healing, sacred and meditative purposes and plays in churches, hospices, nursing homes and hospitals as well as in internationally in concert. Rhett's arrangements and publications are "harpistic" in character, as in the style of a pedal harp, expertly executed to sound grand yet being nicely accessible to the intermediate player.

Rhett, you majored in harp performance, yet still had "stage fright." You say your breakthrough came from reading the book, "The Inner Game of Music."

Actually, I have a Bachelor's degree and a Master's degree in French horn performance, and harp was a secondary study at school, but the point remains the same - in a high pressured conservatory environment, your nerves are constantly getting in the way. The emphasis in a music degree program is mostly on a secure technique, but if you have any kind of "stage fright", you are generally not taught how to overcome that, or at least, I wasn't! I knew going into my degree program that I had a great deal of performance anxiety, and I incorrectly assumed that by getting a degree in music "performance," I would be taught to eradicate this.

Years later, I read the two books, "The Inner Game of Tennis" and "The Inner Game of Music" and they totally changed the way I played. The latter book was written by the principal double bassist of the Cincinnati Symphony, who obviously had great "chops" but suffered from a great deal of performance anxiety. In the book, he talks about how to eliminate a lot of the negative "self-talk" that goes along with being a performing musician.

And you will be teaching some of the techniques in one of your workshops at Southeastern Harp Weekend. I think the seminar is called "Checking Your Baggage." What are a couple of things participants will experience?

I came up with this title because many of us, whether rank beginners, advanced amateurs or seasoned professionals, tend to bring a lot of "baggage" to our public performances. We may not realize it, but we bring heavy burdens of approval needs, some even going back to our childhood, to the stage or sanctuary. This, coupled with incorrect methods of practicing, can be a formula for disaster. In this workshop, I will teach harpists how to attack their own inner fears.

I'll show people the difference between the optimal mindset during practice and the nearly opposite mindset during performing, (which involves a very different type of active listening). And we will approach the whole subject of public performance as a positive, enjoyable experience, rather than a nerve-wracking one.

What do you say to people just learning to play the harp?

Find a good teacher and take lessons, at least to get started. Bad technique is really, really hard to correct later on and the true beauty of the harp is best achieved when one's fingers are doing the right thing.
What is one of the biggest mistakes beginners make?

Trying to self-teach! I don't think the harp is particularly difficult for beginners, but if you don't know how to use the fingers and hands the right way, it will keep you from making a beautiful sound.

And a major mistake an intermediate player might make?

Falling back into bad habits - playing the harp or any instrument is really a life-long process of learning. Our hand muscles tend to forget, even overnight, what they are supposed to do, and the daily process of warming up, even for the most seasoned professional, is a way of "jump starting" these muscles and reminding them how they are supposed to function in order to play the harp. So, intermediate players need to concentrate on continuing to use good form and technique on a regular basis.

What makes a well-received program or performance?

It has nothing to do with the difficulty level of the music - it has everything to do with the performer being totally comfortable and confident in what they are playing. Communicate what is in your heart to the audience, using the harp as a means to that end. Some of the simplest music played well, from the heart, is far more effective that difficult music played badly or nervously.

What would you recommend to someone who wants to play in public for the first time?

Know your piece backwards and forwards, preferably from memory. The main reason people get nervous in public performance is because they have not 100% embodied the music, both technically and mentally. If you can play it 5 or 10 times well in your living room, chances are extremely high that you will play it well in a public performance.

Additionally, you will need to "practice performing" in front of a group of friends, or even a recording device, before trying it in public for the first time. For the first public experience, pick a venue that is going to be comfortable and forgiving, perhaps in a church service or as background music at a social function. And remember, that learning to perform well in public is a life-long process, not a one-time good or bad experience.

You have played the harp in lots of church settings. Do you believe a harpist needs to be religious to give this special service to others?

This is always a difficult question, largely because of the terminology - religion and spirituality can be two very different things. I have always felt that the harp, above all other instruments, has a transcendent and spiritual quality. This is confirmed in a purely historical sense by the fact that virtually all of the most ancient cultures employed the harp for ritual and spiritual purposes. It was never used simply for entertainment, but was used to fulfill a higher purpose in the spiritual life of the community.

Some, though few, churches nowadays require that musicians subscribe to their particular religious system in order to play in their services, but this is not the norm. Someone who pursues a deep interior spiritual life often transcends the limitations set by standard religious practice. I would like to think that anyone who views the harp as a vehicle for spiritual communication, as a means for providing a connection between God and the present time and place, is welcome to play in a church service.
However, I think it is no more appropriate for someone who is an avowed atheist to play in a Christian church or Jewish synagogue, than it is for a staunch Republican to vote at the Democratic National Convention.

And you give a unique seminar about the logistics of playing in churches. What are some of the things people need to know?

Harpists need to know the differences between liturgical practices in various churches, from Roman Catholic, to Protestant, to Jewish. The rules can get very complicated! I have played in churches for over 30 years and I attempt to bring some of this experience in a concrete form to harpists who are just starting out, or may not have played in another denominational church. They need to know what is appropriate and what is not, particularly in Roman Catholic and Episcopal liturgies. We also discuss “nitty-gritty” matters such as compensation and dealing with “Bridezillas!”

You managed the Atlanta Harp Center for four years. What is your advice for someone purchasing a harp?

The process can be made easier by determining a few things up front. One, what is your budget? Two, pedal or lever, and how many strings? Three, what kind of sound do you want, which is usually determined by what kind of music you play. Do you want a brighter, more Celtic sound, or do you prefer a warmer sound, generally for more classical type music? Once you have determined these things, then you go to secondary areas, such as, gut or nylon strings, what kinds of levers, and lastly, the color or finish of the harp.

With harps, you absolutely get what you pay for, and it is extremely rare to find a really good sounding harp that is inexpensive or cheaply made. Avoid at all costs buying Pakistani harps or other "dirt cheap" harps on the internet or Ebay.

Ask fellow harpists if you can try their harps. If you live in an area close to a harp showroom, such as the Atlanta Harp Center, try their harps often. And there will be a tremendous exhibit hall of lever harps at Southeastern Harp Weekend. Try as many as you can and find a harp that speaks to you.

What is something intermediate players can do if they get in a rut?

The best thing to do is to either find a good teacher, or a different teacher, that may be more challenging. Or attend workshops as much as possible with good teachers.

You will give a huge handout for the "Playing for Churches" workshop participants, of the music in print that fits the liturgical calendar, and the sources of where to find the music. In what ways is this useful?

Martha Bailey, who founded the Liturgical Harp Conferences back in the mid- 90s, initially put this together. She gave me permission to use it, and I did some editing and made a few additions, but she did the hard part! This is extremely helpful for people who play in what are considered "liturgical" churches, namely, Episcopal, Lutheran, and Roman Catholic. Because these churches, and even many Methodist and Presbyterian churches, follow a regular liturgical calendar, this guide gives suggestions of appropriate music for all of the major liturgical observances throughout the year. These pieces are all published and available for the harp, so it is an invaluable resource for people who play in these kinds of churches.
You have created very playable and gorgeous arrangements of Bach's music. What is a tip for arranging classical music for the harp so that it is lovely, yet not a chore to learn?

Even though it is Bach or another classical composer, it does not have to be difficult. Most of the great composers were great because they could create a beautiful melody line that was usually not that complicated. So, I try to look first for a beautiful or fairly simple melody, and then add an accompaniment that is "harpistic", that is, it sounds like it might have been originally written for the harp.

The harp does some things really, really well - like playing arpeggios, rolled chords, broken chords, or even simple melody and accompaniment lines. The harp is not good at long, sustained notes or repeated block chords, so take advantage of what the harp does naturally well. Even though much of Bach's music is indeed very complicated, many pieces can be simplified while retaining the integrity of the original.

Good music does not have to be complicated or difficult.

What are your hints for best approaching a new piece?

I tell my students to use the "cut and chew" method. If you go to eat a large steak, you don't try and gobble the whole thing up at once, or you will choke. Instead, you cut it into small pieces and eat them slowly. It's the same with a piece of music - you have to break it down into smaller elements, and learn a little at a time, gradually digesting the whole piece.

I usually learn the first phrase of a piece, or maybe the first 2 - 4 measures, then the last phrase, then work my way inward. If you are planning to perform it, remember that you, and the audience, will most remember the beginning and the end. This is not to say that the middle is not important and should not be played well, but you want to make sure that you are most confident at the beginning and the end of the piece.

How can we improve the efficiency of our practice time?

It's all about quality versus quantity. You can accomplish more in 20 minutes of focused practice than 2 hours of mindless repetition. I alluded to this in the above question - practice in small segments. I am a huge advocate of practicing with a metronome, even slow music. If you focus on just a few bars at a time each day, and really get those few bars learned, you can add another few bars on subsequent days, and before long, you will have the whole piece "embodied."

The absolute worst thing we can do is to try and play the whole bloody piece over and over again from start to finish in hopes that by chance we will eventually get it right. Shinichi Suzuki, founder of the Suzuki Method, said that "practice is the correct repetition of a passage". This means that you take a phrase (or a few bars), and repeat it correctly at least 5 times.

Unfortunately, many of us play a passage over and over again until we get it right, and then once we get it right, we stop. That way you have practiced it incorrectly multiple times and only right once. You have very little chance of getting it right the next time!

So, once you have gotten a passage right, repeat (practice) it correctly for another 5 times or more to "cement" it. Then, your chances are vastly higher that you will play it right in performance.

What is an easy but beneficial exercise you use? Something we can go do right now...

I know this will at first sound boring, but it is actually enjoyable. Do a "one finger" exercise in which you take each finger, and play either scale passages, or better yet, random notes, on the harp, one finger at a time, and focus on closing that one finger into the palm, squeezing the string, and
drawing out the most beautiful sound you can.

You can even use this as a way to improvise, but the goal is to use the fingers to achieve the most beautiful resonant sound you can. By isolating one finger at a time, you can really look at what you are doing and focus on form and beauty of tone. I find this is often my most relaxing and rewarding practice and can even be very meditative!

**What is something about our attitude towards ourselves, or harping in general, that we may all need to know?**

We have to love playing the harp, and to love the music that we are playing, striving to make beautiful sounds. We communicate that to our listeners. If we are not enjoying it our audience will know it. When we put our heart and soul into it, which involves taking a huge risk, the rewards are what keep us playing this instrument. People will forgive mistakes, and most of the time, they don't even notice. However, they immediately recognize a lifeless, heartless, dry performance. I'd much rather hear someone play with passion and perhaps miss a few notes here and there rather than hear a note-perfect performance that was devoid of life and spirit. As I always tell my students, "play it like you mean it!"

*Interviews by Carolyn Deal*

Rhett's website is www.seraphimmusic.com